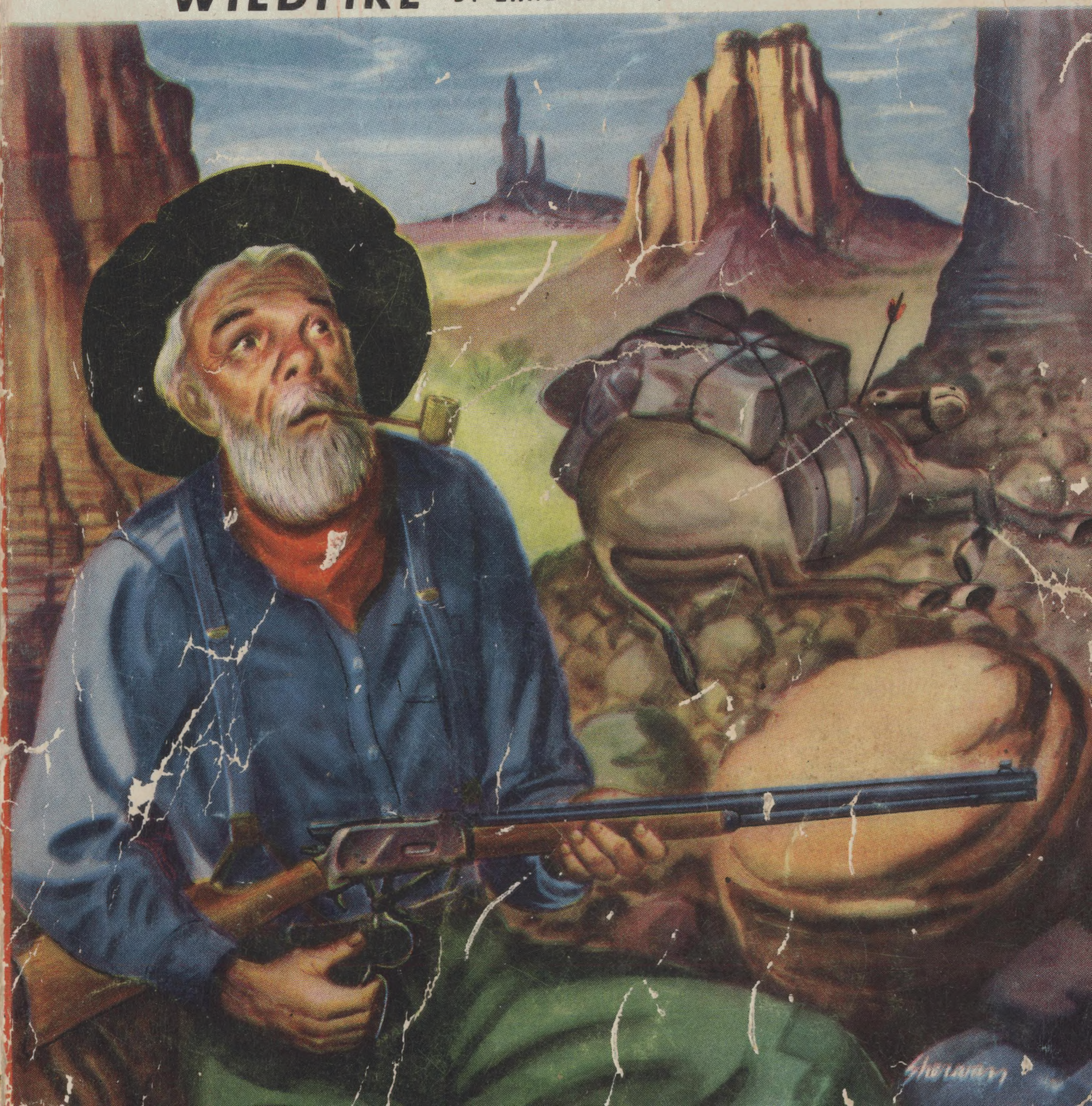
MAY
25¢

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

A DELL MAGAZINE
DELL
A DELL MAGAZINE

WILDFIRE BY ZANE GREY (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE
MAY
A DELL MAGAZINE

"Stop or I'll run you down!"
Wildfire, Chap. 3

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

Vol. 3, No. 3—May, 1949

NOVEL (magazine abridgment)

WILDFIRE — *Zane Grey* — 3

NOVELETTE

ESCAPE — *Frank Gruber* — 140

SHORT STORIES

THE MAN WHO RODE BACK—*A Zane Grey Western Award Story* — *Norman A. Fox* — 110

SCARS — *Theodore Sturgeon* — 119

FALSE TEETH NEVER RING TRUE—*A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn* — *Walker A. Tompkins* — 128

FACT FEATURE

THE VOW — *Edwin L. Sabin* — 125

PICTORIAL FEATURE

QUIET KILLER — *Nicholas S. Firfires* — Inside back cover

VERSE

ON GITTIN' FED UP — *C. Wiles Hallock* — 139

DEPARTMENTS

CHOUSED WORDS—*A Western Quiz* — 118

FREE-FOR-ALL—*The Editors Speak* — 159

Cover picture by Earl Sherwan—Frontispiece by M. Kinzelman—
Back cover: "Outlaw Bronc," a painting by Leonard H. Reedy

Published monthly by

DELL PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.

George T. Delacorte, Jr., *President* • Helen Meyer, *Vice-President* • Albert P. Delacorte, *Vice-President*

261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y.

by arrangement with THE HAWLEY PUBLICATIONS, INC. Re-entered as second class matter July 2, 1947, at the post office at New York, New York, under the act of March 3, 1879. Additional second class entry at the post office at Racine, Wisconsin. Printed in the U.S.A. *Copyright, 1949, by The Hawley Publications, Inc.* *Address all subscriptions to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, 261 Fifth Avenue, New York 16, N. Y., or to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Poughkeepsie, New York. Address all manuscripts and editorial correspondence to Zane Grey's Western Magazine, Racine, Wisconsin. Single copy, 25c; yearly subscription (12 issues) $3.00 in U.S.A. and possessions, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $4.00 in foreign countries, (no Canadian subscriptions accepted). Editor: Don Ward. Advisory editors: R. Zane Grey and Stephen Slesinger.* Designed and produced by Western Printing & Lithographing Company.

THROUGH THE WILD UPLAND COUNTRY *an iron-willed mustang hunter, gaunt, hollow-eyed, half starved, clings grimly to the trail of a magnificent wild stallion. The unrelenting chase has stretched from days into weeks, and Lin Slone's two partners have long since given up and turned back, convinced that the task of capturing the fiery red horse is an impossible one. But Lin Slone, having once set eyes on the giant monarch of the wild-horse herds, cannot forget that wonderful sight. Life will mean nothing to him if he cannot capture and break "Wildfire," as he has already named the stallion.*

Meanwhile, Lucy Bostil, reckless-spirited, radiantly lovely daughter of a prosperous horse rancher, is faced with a multitude of vexing problems. Only eighteen, she has reached a full-blown womanhood, tempting and desirable in the eyes of many men. Her father, however, persists in treating her as a mere girl, not seeing her need to assert her new-found womanhood. Her warm-hearted Aunt Jane realizes what is happening but irritates Lucy by pressing the case of a well-to-do suitor. Lucy is also troubled by the unwanted attentions of Joel Creech, a youth whom she pities and of whose unbalanced mentality and violent emotions she becomes only gradually aware. And there is the ever-present menace of the outlaw, Cordts, who has sworn that if he cannot get Sage King, Bostil's great racer, he will take Lucy as a "consolation prize."

One day Lucy, while exercising Sage King in preparation for the great race that is to be held at Bostil's Ford, discovers Slone lying injured and, near by, the stallion, Wildfire. She and Slone make a pact which results in her riding Wildfire against Sage King, her father's favorite. The race, vivid and tremendously exciting, is followed by a climax of mounting tempo and cumulative thrills as the Creeches strike at Bostil through Lucy, the unscrupulous Cordts deals himself in, and Lin Slone rides Wildfire to one of the most dramatic and breath-taking rescues in Western fiction.

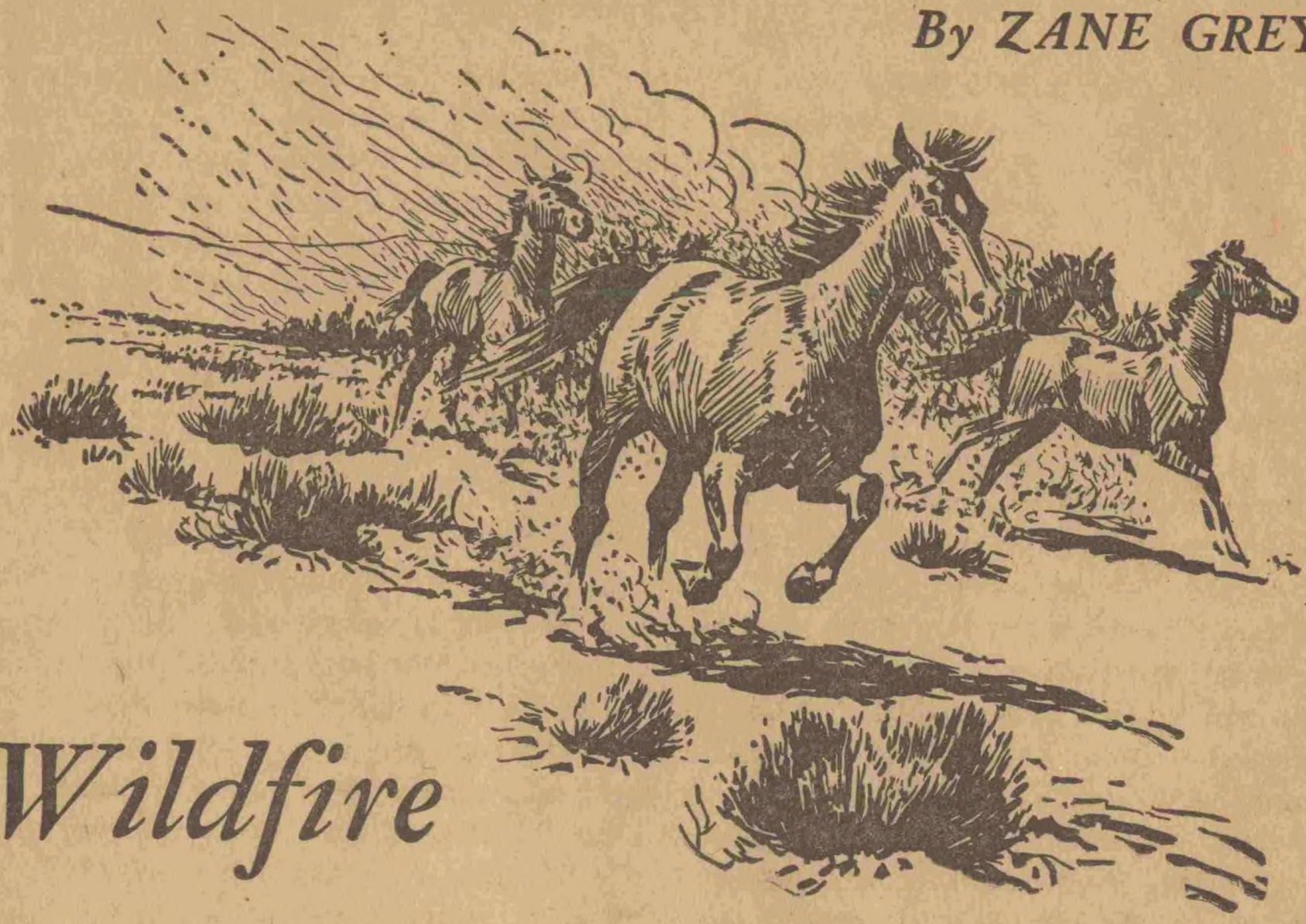
The June issue of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE will present to you the thrilling magazine abridgment of

The Man of the Forest

Zane Grey tells the moving story of a solitary woodland giant and his battle to safeguard an Eastern beauty's inheritance

ON SALE ABOUT MAY 6

By ZANE GREY



Wildfire

CHAPTER ONE

Bostil's Ranch

FOR some reason the desert scene before Lucy Bostil awoke varying emotions—a sweet gratitude for the fullness of her life there at the Ford, yet a haunting remorse that she could not be wholly content—a vague loneliness of soul—a thrill and a fear for the strangely calling future, glorious, unknown.

She longed for something to happen. It might be terrible, so long as it was wonderful. This day, when Lucy had stolen away on a forbidden horse, she was 18 years old. The thought of her mother, who had died long ago on their way into this wilderness, was the one drop of sadness in her joy. Lucy loved everybody at Bostil's Ford and everybody loved her. She loved all the horses except her father's favorite racer, that perverse devil of a horse, the great Sage King.

Lucy was glowing and rapt with love for all she beheld from her lofty perch—the green-and-pink blossoming hamlet beneath her, set between the beauty of the gray sage expanse and the ghastliness of the barren heights; the swift Colorado sullenly thundering below in the abyss; the Indians in their bright colors, riding up the river trail; the eagle poised like a feather on the air, and a mile beneath him the grazing cattle making black dots on the sage; the deep velvet azure of the sky; the golden lights on the bare peaks and the lilac veils in the far ravines; the silky rustle of a canyon swallow as he shot downward in the sweep of the

Copyright, 1916, by Curtis Publishing Co., renewed, 1944, by Lina Elise Grey; copyright, 1917, by Harper & Bros., renewed, 1945, by Lina Elise Grey. Magazine abridgment by arrangement with The Hawley Publications, Inc.

wind; the fragrance of cedar, the flowers of the spear-pointed mescal; the brooding silence, the beckoning range, the purple distance.

One morning in early spring, as was Bostil's custom, he ordered the racers to be brought from the corrals and turned loose. He loved to sit there and watch his horses graze, but ever he saw that the riders were close at hand, and that the horses did not get out on the slope of sage. He sat back and gloried in the sight. He owned bands of mustangs; near by was a field of them, fine and mettlesome; yet Bostil had eyes only for the blooded favorites.

There was Plume, a superb mare that got her name from the way her mane swept in the wind when she was on the run; and there was Two Face, like a coquette, sleek and glossy and cunning; and the huge, rangy bay, Dusty Ben; and the black stallion Sarchedon; and lastly Sage King, the color of the upland sage, a racer in build, a horse splendid and proud and beautiful.

"Where's Lucy?" presently asked Bostil.

Some rider had seen Lucy riding off, with her golden hair flying in the wind. This was an old story.

"She's up on Buckles?" Bostil queried, turning sharply to the speaker.

"Reckon so," was the calm reply.

Bostil swore. "Farlane, you'd orders. Lucy's not to ride them hosses, least of all Buckles. He ain't safe even for a man."

"Wal, he's safe fer Lucy."

"She's got to keep out of the sage," growled Bostil. "It ain't safe for her out there. What's makin' them dust clouds on the sage? Antelope? Holley, you used to have eyes better'n me. Use them, will you?"

A gray-haired, hawk-eyed rider, lean and worn, approached with clinking spurs.

"Down in there," said Bostil, pointing.

"Thet's a bunch of wild hosses," replied Holley.

"Huh! I don't like it. Lucy oughtn't to be ridin' round alone."

"Wal, Boss, who could catch her up on Buckles? Lucy can ride. An' there's the King an' Sarch right under your nose—the only hosses on the sage thet could outrun Buckles."

"Reckon you spoke sense for once, Farlane," replied Bostil with relief. "I wasn't thinkin' so much of danger for Lucy—but she lets thet half-witted Creech go with her."

"No, boss, you're wrong," put in Holley earnestly. "I know the girl. She has no use fer Joel. But he jest runs after her."

"If she meets him again I'll rope her in the house," declared Bostil.

Another clear-eyed rider drew Bostil's attention from the gray waste of rolling sage. "Bostil, look! Look at the King! He's watchin' fer somethin'—an' so's Sarch."

The two horses named were facing a ridge some few hundred yards distant, and their heads were aloft and ears straight forward. Sage King whistled shrilly and Sarchedon began to prance.

"Boys, you'd better drive them in," said Bostil. "They'd like nothin' so well as gettin' out on the sage. Hullo! what's thet shootin' up behind the ridge?"

"No more'n Buckles with Lucy makin' him run some," replied Holley with a dry laugh.

"If it ain't! Lord! look at him come!"

The slope before him was open, and almost level, down to the ridge that had hidden the missing girl and horse. Buckles was running for the love of running, as the girl low down over his neck was riding for the love of riding.

Sage King whistled again, and shot off with graceful sweep to meet them; Sarchedon plunged after him; Two Face and Plume jealously trooped down, too, but Dusty Ben, after a toss of his head, went on grazing.

The gray and the black met Buckles and could not turn in time to stay with him. A girl's gay scream pealed up the slope, and Buckles went lower and faster. Sarchedon was left behind. Then the gray King began to run as if before he had been loping. This was play—a game—a race—plainly dominated by the spirit of the girl.

Lucy's hair was a bright stream of gold in the wind. She rode bareback. Her motion was one with the horse. Again that wild, gay scream pealed out—call or laugh or challenge. Sage King, with a fleetness that made the eyes of Bostil and his riders glisten, took the lead, and then sheered off to slow down, while Buckles thundered past. Lucy was pulling him hard, and had him plunging to a halt, when the rider Holley ran out to grasp his bridle.

"No use, Lucy," said Bostil. "You can't beat the King at your own game, even with a runnin' start."

Lucy Bostil's eyes were blue, as keen as her father's, and now they flashed like his. She had a hand twisted in the horse's long mane, and as, lithe and supple, she slipped a knee across his broad back she shook a little fist at Bostil's gray racer.

"Sage King, I hate you!" she called, as if the horse were human. "And I'll beat you some day!"

Bostil swore by the gods his Sage King was the swiftest horse in all that wild upland country of wonderful horses. He swore the great gray could look back over his shoulder and run away from any broken horse known to the riders.

Bostil's cattle and horses were numberless, and many as were his riders, he always could use more. But most riders did not abide long with Bostil—first because some of them were of a wandering breed, wild-horse hunters themselves; and secondly, Bostil had two great faults: he seldom paid a rider in money, and he never permitted one to own a fleet horse. He wanted to own all the fast horses himself.

Whenever Bostil could not get possession of a horse he coveted, either by purchase or trade, he invariably acquired a grievance toward the owner. This happened often, for riders were loath to part with their favorites. And he made more than one enemy by his persistent nagging.

Across the Colorado, in a high, red-walled canyon opening upon the river, lived a poor sheepherder and horse trader named Creech. This man owned a number of thoroughbreds, two of which he would not part with for all the gold in the uplands. These racers, Blue Roan and Peg, had been captured wild on the ranges by Ute Indians and broken to racing. Creech laughed at all offers and taunted Bostil with a boast that in another summer he would see a horse out in front of the King.

To complicate matters and lead rivalry into hatred young Joel Creech, a great horseman, but worthless in the eyes of all save his father, had been

heard to say that some day he would force a race between the King and Blue Roan.

That threat had been taken in various ways. It alienated Bostil beyond all hope of reconciliation. It made Lucy Bostil laugh and look sweetly mysterious. It was gossiped by the women of Bostil's Ford that she had more than liking for the idle Joel. But the husbands of these gossips said Lucy was only tenderhearted.

It had always been a fascinating subject, this long-looked-for-race. It grew more so when Joel's infatuation for Lucy became known. All the riders who loved horses and all the women who loved gossip were united in at least one thing, and that was that something like a race or a romance would soon disrupt the peaceful, sleepy tenor of Bostil's Ford.

In addition to Bostil's growing hatred for the Creeches, he had a great fear of Cordts, the horse thief. A fear ever restless, ever watchful. Cordts hid back in the untrodden ways. He had secret friends among the riders of the ranges, faithful followers back in the canyon camps, gold for the digging, cattle by the thousand, and fast horses. He had always gotten what he wanted, except one thing—Sage King.

Cordts was a product of the early gold fields of California and Idaho, an outcast from that evil wave of wanderers retreating back over the trails so madly traveled westward. He became a lord over the free ranges. But more than all else he was a rider. He knew a horse. The passion he had conceived for the Sage King was the passion of a man for an unattainable woman. Cordts swore that he would never rest, that he would not die, till he owned the King.

Chapter Two

'Dobe Mud

BOSTIL went toward the house with his daughter, turning at the door to call a last word to his riders about the care of his horses.

The house was a low, flat, wide structure, with a corridor running through the middle, from which doors led into the adobe-walled rooms. The windows were small openings high up, evidently intended for defense as well as light, and they had rude wooden shutters. The floor was clay, covered everywhere by Indian blankets.

As Bostil entered with his arm round Lucy a big hound rose from the hearth. This room was immense, running the length of the house, and it contained a huge stone fireplace, where a kettle smoked fragrantly, and rude homemade chairs with blanket coverings, and tables to match, and walls covered with bridles, guns, pistols, Indian weapons and ornaments, and trophies of the chase. In a far corner stood a workbench, with tools upon it and horse trappings under it. In the opposite corner a door led into the kitchen.

Bostil's sister came in from the kitchen. She was a huge person with a severe yet motherly face. She had her hands on her hips, and she cast a rather disapproving glance at father and daughter.

"So you're back again?" she queried severely.

"Sure, Auntie," replied the girl complacently.

"You ran off to get out of seeing Wetherby, didn't you?"

Lucy stared sweetly at her aunt.

"He was waiting for hours," went on the worthy woman. "I never saw a man in such a stew. No wonder, playing fast and loose with him the way you do."

"I told him no!" flashed Lucy.

"But Wetherby's not the kind to take no. You've fooled enough with these riders of your dad's. If you're not careful you'll marry one of them– Wetherby is young and he idolizes you. In all common sense why don't you take him?"

"I don't care for him," replied Lucy.

"You like him as well as anybody. John Bostil, what do you say?"

"Sure, I like Jim," interrupted Bostil, and he avoided Lucy's swift look.

"Well?" demanded his sister.

"See here, Jane," said Bostil with an air of finality, "the girl is of age today –an' she can do what she damn pleases!"

"That's a fine thing for you to say," retorted Aunt Jane. "Like as not she'll be fetching that hang-dog Joel Creech up here for you to support."

"Auntie!" cried Lucy, her eyes blazing.

"Oh, child, you torment me–worry me so," said the disappointed woman. "It's all for your sake. Look at you, Lucy Bostil! A girl of eighteen who comes of a family! And you riding around and going around as you are now–in a man's clothes!"

"But, you dear old goose, I can't ride in a woman's skirt," expostulated Lucy. "Mind you, Auntie, I can *ride!*"

"Lucy, if I live here forever I'd never get reconciled to a Bostil woman in leather pants. We Bostils were somebody once, back in Missouri."

Bostil laughed. "Yes, an' if I hadn't hit the trail west we'd be starvin' yet. Jane, you're a sentimental old fool. Let the girl alone an' reconcile yourself to this wilderness."

Aunt Jane's eyes were wet with tears. Lucy, seeing them, ran to her and hugged and kissed her.

"Auntie, I will promise–from today –to have some dignity. I've been free as a boy in these rider clothes. As I am now the men never seem to regard me as a girl. Somehow that's better. I can't explain, but I *like* it. My dresses are what have caused all the trouble. I know that. But if I'm grown up–if it's so tremendous–then I'll wear a dress all the time, except just *when* I ride. Will that do, Auntie?"

"Maybe you will grow up, after all," replied Aunt Jane, surprised and pleased.

Then Lucy with clinking spurs ran away to her room. Aunt Jane returned to her housewifely tasks.

Presently Lucy returned–a different Lucy–one that did not rouse his rider's pride, but thrilled his father's heart. She had been a slim, lithe, supple, disheveled boy, breathing the wild spirit of the open and the horse she rode. She was now a girl in the graceful roundness of her slender form, with hair the gold of the sage at sunset, and eyes the blue of the deep haze of distance, and lips the sweet red of the upland rose. And all about her seemed different.

"Lucy, I want to ask you somethin'," said Bostil presently. "What about this young Joel Creech?"

"What do you mean?"

"Lucy, is there anythin' between you an' Joel?" he asked gravely.

"No," she replied, with her clear eyes up to his.

Bostil thought of a bluebell. "I'm beggin' your pardon," he said hastily.

"Dad, you know how Joel runs after

me. I've told you. I let him till lately. I liked him. But that wasn't why. I felt sorry for him—pitied him."

"You did? Seems an awful waste," replied Bostil.

"Dad, I don't believe Joel is—perfectly right in his mind," Lucy said solemnly.

"Goin' batty over you. That's no unusual sign round this camp. Look at—"

"We're talking about Joel Creech. Lately he has done some queer things. Today, for instance. I thought I gave him the slip, but he must have been watching. Anyway, to my surprise he showed up on Peg. He doesn't often get Peg across the river. He said the feed was getting scarce over there. I was dying to race Buckles against Peg, but I remembered you wouldn't like that."

"I should say not," said Bostil darkly.

"Well, Joel caught up to me—and he wasn't nice at all. We quarreled, and he got sulky and hung back. On my way home I saw Peg grazing on the rim of the creek, near that big spring-hole where the water's so deep and clear. And what do you think? There was Joel's head above the water. When he saw me—he—then—then he—" Lucy faltered, blushing.

"Well, what then?" demanded Bostil.

"He called, 'Hey, Luce—take off your clothes and come in for a swim!' "

Bostil swore.

"I yelled, 'I'll fix you, Joel Creech!' His clothes were in a pile on the bank. At first I thought I'd throw them in the water, but when I got to them I thought of something better. I took up all but his shoes, for I remembered the ten miles of rock and cactus between him and home, and I climbed up on Buckles. Joel screamed and swore something fearful. But I didn't look back. And Peg, you know—maybe you don't know—but Peg is fond of me, and she followed me, straddling her bridle all the way in. I dropped Joel's clothes down the ridge a ways, right in the trail, so he can't miss them. And that's all. Dad, was it—was it very bad?"

"Bad! Why, you ought to have thrown your gun on him. But maybe you've done enough. I guess you never thought of it."

"What?"

"The sun is hot today. Hot! An' if Joel's as crazy an' mad as you say he'll not have sense enough to stay in the water or shade till the sun's gone down. An' if he tackles that ten miles before, he'll sunburn himself within an inch of his life."

"Sunburn? Oh, Dad! I'm sorry," burst out Lucy contritely. "I never thought of that. I'll ride back with his clothes."

"Girl, haven't you the nerve to play your own game? Let Creech get his lesson. He deserves it. An' now, Lucy, I've two more questions to ask."

"Only two?" she queried archly. "Dad, don't scold me with questions."

"What shall I say to Wetherby for good an' all?"

"Tell him to go back to Durango and forget the foolish girl who can care only for the desert and a horse."

"All right. That is straight talk, like an Indian's. An' now the last question—what do you want for a birthday present?"

"Oh, of course," she cried, gleefully clapping her hands. "I'd forgotten that. I'm eighteen!"

"You get that old chest of your mother's. But what from me?"

"Dad, will you give me anything I ask for?"

"Yes, my girl."

"Anything—any *horse?*"

"Sure; any horse but the King."

"How about Sarchedon?"

"Why, Lucy, what'd you do with that big black devil? He's too high. Seventeen hands high! You couldn't mount him."

"Pooh! Sarch *kneels* for me."

"Child, listen to reason. Sarch would pull your arms out of their sockets."

"He has got an iron jaw," agreed Lucy. "Well, then—how about Dusty Ben?"

"No—not Ben. He's the faithfulest hoss I ever owned. It wouldn't be fair to part with him, even to you."

"Dad, you're afraid I'd train and love Ben into beating the King. Some day I'll ride some horse out in front of the gray. Then give me Two Face."

"Not her, Lucy. She can't be trusted. Look why we named her Two Face."

"Buckles, then."

"Lucy, can't you be satisfied an' happy with your mustangs? You've got a dozen. You can have any others on the range. Buckles ain't safe for you to ride."

Bostil was notably the most generous of men, the kindest of fathers. It was an indication of his strange obsession, in regard to horses, that he never would see that Lucy was teasing him.

"I'd love to own Plume," said Lucy.

"Girl, I—I thought you hadn't no use for Plume," he stammered.

"I haven't—the jade! She threw me once. I've never forgiven her— Dad, I'm only teasing you. Don't I know you couldn't give one of those racers away? You couldn't!"

"Lucy, I reckon you're right," Bostil burst out in immense relief.

"I'll bet if Cordts gets me and holds me as ransom for the King, as he's threatened, you'll let him have me!"

"Lucy, now thet ain't funny!"

"Dear Dad, keep your old racers! But, remember, I'm my father's daughter. I can love a horse, too. Oh, if I ever get the one I want to love! A wild horse—a desert stallion—pure Arabian—broken right by an Indian! If I ever get him, Dad, you look out! For I'll run away from Sarch and Ben—and I'll beat the King!"

The hamlet of Bostil's Ford had a singular situation, though considering the wonderful nature of that desert country, it was not exceptional. It lay under the protecting red bluff that only Lucy Bostil cared to climb. Its few inhabitants, as a whole, were prosperous. The wants of pioneers were few. Perhaps once a month the big, clumsy flatboat was rowed across the river with horses or cattle or sheep. And the season was now close at hand when for weeks, sometimes months, the river was unfordable.

Old Brackton, a man of varied Western experience who kept the one store, came briskly out to meet an incoming freighter. The wagon was minus a hind wheel, but the teamster had come in on three wheels and a pole. The sweaty, dusty-caked, weary, thin-ribbed mustangs, and the gray-and-red-stained wagon, and the huge jumble of dusty packs, showed something of what the journey had been.

"Hi thar, Red Wilson, you air some late gettin' in," greeted old Brackton.

"Yep. An' I left a wheel an' part of the load on the trail," said Red.

Riders lounging in the shade greeted Wilson and inquired for news. The teamster replied that travel was dry, the water holes were dry, and he was dry.

"Say, Van, when will the races come off?" someone asked after a time.

"Bostil says in a few weeks, soon as he hears from the Indians. Plans to have eight hundred Indians here, an' the biggest purses an' best races ever had at the Ford."

"You'll ride the King again?"

"Reckon so. But Bostil is kickin' because I'm heavier than I was," replied the rider.

"Mebbe you'll need to work a little off, Van. Some one said Creech's Blue Roan was comin' fast this year."

"Bill, your mind ain't operatin'," replied Van. "Didn't I beat Creech's hosses last year without the King turnin' a hair?"

"Not if I recollect, you didn't. The Blue Roan wasn't runnin'."

Then they argued, after the manner of friendly riders, but all earnest, all eloquent in their convictions. The prevailing opinion was that Creech's horse had a chance, depending upon condition and luck. They looked up to see Lucy Bostil coming.

Lucy was at home among them, and the shy eyes of the younger riders, especially Van, were nothing if not revealing. She greeted them with a bright smile, and when she saw Brackton she burst out:

"Oh, Mr. Brackton, the wagon's in, and did my box come? Today's my birthday."

"'Deed it did, Lucy; an' many more happy ones to you!" he replied. "But it's too heavy for you. I'll send it up—or mebbe one of the boys—"

Five riders in unison eagerly offered their services. Van shouldered the box at last, and they went away. The good-natured raillery among the rest was interrupted by a sharp word from one of them:

"Look! Darn me if thet ain't a naked Indian comin'!"

The riders whirled to see an apparently nude savage approaching, almost on a run.

"Take a shot at thet, Bill," said another rider. "Miss Lucy might see—No, she's out of sight. But, mebbe some other woman is around."

"Hold on, Bill," called Macomber. "You never saw an Indian run like thet."

"Sure his face is white, if his body's red!"

The strange figure neared them.

"Damned if it ain't Joel Creech!"

"Gone crazy, sure!"

"Say, but ain't he wild? Foamin' at the mouth like a winded hoss!"

Young Creech was headed down the road toward the ford across which he had to go to reach home. He saw the curious group and halted. His face seemed convulsed with rage. His body, even to his hands, was incased in a thick, heavy coating of red adobe that had caked hard.

"God's sake—fellers—" he panted, with eyes rolling, "take this—'dobe mud off me! I'm dyin'!"

That evening after supper Bostil stamped into the big room, roaring with laughter. "Now—you've—done—it—Lucy Bostil!" he shouted.

"Joel!" whispered Lucy, who had a guilty conscience.

"Lucy, I never heard the beat of it. Joel's smarter in some ways than we thought, an' crazier in others. He couldn't or wouldn't wait for sundown. An' he wasn't hankerin' to be burned. So he wallows in a 'dobe mudhole an' covers himself thick with mud. You know that 'dobe mud! Then he starts home. But he hadn't figgered on the

'dobe gettin' hard, which it did—harder'n rock. An' thet must have hurt more'n sunburn. Late this afternoon he came runnin' down the road, yellin' thet he was dyin'. The boys had conniption fits. Mebbe they didn't try hard to clean him off. But the fact is not for hours did they get thet 'dobe off him. They washed an' scrubbed an' curried him, while he yelled an' cussed. Finally they peeled it off, with his skin I guess. He was raw, an' they say, the maddest feller ever seen in Bostil's Ford!"

Lucy was struggling between fear and mirth. "Oh! Oh, Dad! What—will he—do?"

"Lord only knows. Thet worries me some. Because he never said a word about how he come to lose his clothes or why he had the 'dobe on him. An' sure I never told. Nobody knows but us."

"Dad, he'll do something terrible to me!" cried Lucy.

Chapter Three

Joel Creech's Madness

THE days passed slowly at Bostil's Ford. But except in winter, and during the spring sandstorms, the lagging time passed pleasantly. Lucy rode every day, sometimes with Van, and sometimes alone. She was not over-keen about riding with Van—because he was in love with her, and because she could not beat him when he rode the King. They were training Bostil's horses for the much-anticipated races.

At last word arrived from the Utes and Navajos that they accepted Bostil's invitation and would come in force, which meant, according to Holley and other old riders, that the Indians would attend about 800 strong.

The day he received word from the Indians Bostil sent for Brackton, Williams, Muncie, and Creech to come to his house that night. These men, with Bostil, had for years formed a sort of club the Ford was quite noted for. Creech was no longer a friend of Bostil's, but Bostil had always been fair-minded, and now he did not allow his animosities to influence him. Holley, the veteran rider, made the sixth member of the club.

Bostil had a cedar log blazing cheerily in the wide fireplace, for these early spring nights in the desert were cold.

Brackton was the last guest to arrive. "John, I reckon you won't love me fer this here I've got to tell you, tonight specially," he said seriously.

"You old robber, I couldn't love you anyhow," retorted Bostil. "What's up?"

"Who do you suppose I jest sold whisky to?"

"I've no idea," replied Bostil, yet he looked as if he was perfectly sure.

"Cordts! Cordts, an' four of his outfit. Two of them I didn't know. The others was Hutchinson an'—Dick Sears."

"*Dick Sears!*" exclaimed Bostil.

Muncie and Williams echoed Bostil. Holley appeared suddenly interested. Creech alone showed no surprise.

"But Sears is dead," added Bostil.

"He was dead—we thought," replied Brackton with a grim laugh. "But he's alive again. He told me he'd been in Idaho fer two years, in the gold fields. Said the work was too hard, so he'd come back here. Laughed when he said it, the little devil! I'll bet he was thinkin' of thet wagon train of mine he

stole before leavin' here!"

"Lord! Cordts an' Sears in camp!" ejaculated Bostil and he began to pace the room.

"No, they're gone now," said Brackton.

"Take it easy, Boss. Sit down," drawled Holley. "The King is safe, an' all the racers. I swear to thet. Why, Cordts couldn't chop into thet log-an'-wire corral if he an' his gang chopped all night! They hate work! Besides, Farlane is there, an' the boys."

This reassured Bostil, and he resumed his chair. "Did Cordts have anythin' to say?" he asked.

"Sure. He was friendly an' talkative," replied Brackton. "He came in just after dark. He bought two big packs of supplies, an' some leather stuff, an', of course, ammunition. Then some whisky. He'd been out north of Durango an' fetched news. There's wild talk back there of a railroad goin' to be built some day, joinin' East an' West."

"Grandest idea ever thought of for the West," avowed Bostil. "If thet railroad ever starts we'll all get rich—go on, Brack."

"Then Cordts said water an' grass was peterin' out back on the trail, same as Red Wilson said last week. Finally he asked, 'How's my friend Bostil?' I told him you was well. He looked kind of thoughtful then, an' I knew what was comin'—'How's the King?'

"'Grand' I told him—'grand.'

"'When is them races comin' off?'

"I said we hadn't planned the time yet, but it would be soon—inside of a month or two.

"'Brackton,' he said, sharp-like, 'is Bostil goin' to pull a gun on me at sight?'

"'Reckon he is,' I told him.

"'Wal, I'm not powerful glad to know thet. I hear Creech's blue hoss will race the King this time. How about it?'.

"'Sure an' certain this year. I've Creech's an' Bostil's word for thet.'

"Cordts put his hand on my shoulder. "You ought to've seen his eyes! 'I want to see thet race—I'm goin' to.'

"'Wal,' I said, 'you'll have to stop bein'—you'll need to change your bizness.'

"Then Cordts swore he wouldn't turn a trick or let a man of his gang stir a hand till after thet race, if you'd let him come."

A light flitted across Bostil's face. "I know how Cordts feels," he said.

"Wal, it's a queer deal," went on Brackton. "Fer a long time you've meant to draw on Cordts when you meet. We all know thet."

"Yes, I'll kill him!" Bostil's mouth opened, drooped strangely at the corners, then shut in a grim, tense line.

"Bostil, it's a cheap way to get at least a little honesty from Cordts. An' refusin' might rile him bad. When all's said Cordts ain't as bad as he could be."

"I'll let him come," replied Bostil, breathing deep. "But it'll be hard to see him, rememberin' how he's robbed me, an' what he's threatened. An' I ain't lettin' him come to bribe a few weeks' decency from him. I'm doin' it for only one reason. Because I know how he loves the King—how he wants to see the King run away from the field thet day! Thet's why!"

"Bostil, if Cordts loves the King thet well, he's in fer heartbreak," said Creech with a ring in his voice.

Down crashed Bostil's heavy boots and fire flamed in his gaze. The other men laughed loudly, and Brackton

hastily interposed:

"Hold on, you boy riders! We ain't a-goin' to have any arguments like thet. Now, Bostil, it's settled, then? You'll let Cordis come?"

"Glad to have him," replied Bostil.

"Good. An' now mebbe we'd better get down to the bizness of this here meetin'."

They seated themselves around the table, upon which Bostil laid an old and much-soiled ledger and a stub of a lead pencil. "First we'll set the time," he said with animation, "an' then pitch into the details. This is April thirteenth. Three days beginnin'—say June first. June first—second, an' third. How about thet for the races?"

Everybody agreed, and Bostil laboriously wrote that down. Then they planned the details. Purses and prizes, largely donated by Bostil and Muncie, the rich members of the community, were recorded. The old rules were adhered to. Bostil argued for a certain weight in riders, but the others ruled out this suggestion.

When it came to arranging the details of the big race between the high-class racers, then he grew intense and harder to deal with. Many points had to go by vote. Muncie and Williams both had fleet horses to enter in this race; Holley had one; Creech had two; there were sure to be several Indians with fast mustangs; and Bostil had the King and four others to choose from. Bostil held out stubbornly for a long race. The vote went against Bostil, much to his chagrin, and the great race was set down for two miles.

"But two miles! Two miles!" he kept repeating. "Thet's Blue Roan's distance. Thet's his distance. An' it ain't fair to the King!"

His guests, excepting Creech, argued with him, explained, reasoned, showed him that it was fair to all concerned. Bostil finally acquiesced, but he was not happy.

When the men were departing Bostil called Creech back into the sitting-room. "What'll you take for the roan?" he asked tersely.

"Bostil, didn't we thresh thet out before—an' *fell* out over it?" queried Creech with a deprecating spread of his hands.

"You need money an' hosses, don't you?" demanded Bostil brutally.

"Lord knows I do," replied Creech.

"Wal, then, here's your chance. I'll give you five hundred in gold an' Sarchedon to boot."

"No," replied Creech.

"I'll make it a thousand an' throw Plume in with Sarch," flashed Bostil.

"No!" Creech turned pale and swallowed hard.

"Two thousand an' Dusty Ben along with the others?"

This was an unheard-of price to pay for any horse. Creech saw that Bostil was desperate. It was an almost overpowering temptation.

Bostil did not give Creech time to speak. "Twenty-five hundred an' Two-Face along with the rest!"

"My God, Bostil—stop it! I can't *part* with Blue Roan. You're rich an' you've no heart. Thet I always knew. At least to me you never had, since I owned them two racers. Didn't I beg you, a little time back, to lend me a few hundred? To meet thet debt? An' you wouldn't, unless I'd sell the hosses. An' I had to lose my sheep. Now I'm a poor man—gettin' poorer all the time. But I won't sell or trade Blue Roan, not for all you've got!"

Creech raised a clenching fist. "An' by God, I'm goin' to win thet race!"

During that week Lucy had heard many things about Joel Creech, and some of them were disquieting.

Some rider had not only found Joel's clothes on the trail, but he had recognized the track of the horse Lucy rode, and at once connected her with the singular discovery. Coupling that with Joel's appearance in the village incased in a heaving armor of adobe, the riders guessed pretty close to the truth. For them the joke was tremendous.

It came to Lucy's ears that Joel began to act and talk strangely. She found out that the rider Van had knocked Joel down in Brackton's store and had kicked a gun out of his hand. Van laughed off the rumor and Brackton gave her no satisfaction. Finally, when Muncie discharged Joel, who worked now and then, Lucy realized that something was wrong with Joel and that she was to blame for it.

She grew worried and anxious and sorry, but she held her peace, and determined to find out for herself what was wrong. Every day when she rode out into the sage she expected to meet him, or at least see him somewhere; nevertheless days went by and there was no sign of him.

One afternoon she saw some Indians driving sheep down the river road toward the ford, and, acting upon impulse, she turned her horse after them.

Lucy seldom went down the river road. She always felt awe at the gloomy canyon and fear at the strange, murmuring red river. But she started down this afternoon in the hope of meeting Joel.

The sheep raised a dust cloud in the sandy wash where the road wound down, and Lucy hung back to let them get farther ahead. The dust cloud hung over the head of the ravine, and Lucy had to force Sarchedon through it.

The wash, with its sand and clay walls, dropped into a gulch, and there was an end of green growths. The road lead down over solid rock. Presently she came out upon a lower branch of the canyon into a great red-walled space, with the river still 1,000 feet below, and the cliffs towering as high above her. The road led down along this rim where to the left all was open, across to the split and peaked wall opposite. The river appeared to sweep round a bold, bulging corner a mile above. It was a wide, swift, muddy, turbulent stream. A great bar of sand stretched out from the shore. Beyond it, through the mouth of an intersecting canyon, could be seen a clump of cottonwoods and willows that marked the home of the Creeches.

Lucy could not see the shore nearest her, as it was almost directly under her. Besides, in this narrow road, on a spirited horse, she was not inclined to watch the scenery. She hurried Sarchedon down and down, under the overhanging brows of rock, to where the rim sloped out and failed. Here was a half acre of sand, with a few scant willows, set down seemingly in a dent at the base of the giant, beetling cliffs.

Lucy rode across the bar to the shore where the Indians were loading the sheep into an immense rude flatboat. Their bleating could be heard above the roar of the river. Bostil's boatmen, Shugrue and Somers, stood knee-deep in the quicksand of the bar, and their

efforts to keep free-footed were as strenuous as their handling of the sheep.

Presently the flock was all crowded on board, the Indians followed, and then the boatmen slid the unwieldy craft off the sand bar. Then, each manning a clumsy oar, they pulled upstream. Along shore were whirling, slow eddies, and there rowing was possible. The method of crossing was to row up along the shore as far as a great cape of rock jutting out, and there make into the current, and while drifting down pull hard to reach the landing opposite.

Lucy watched the slow, laborious struggle of the boatmen with the heavy oars until she suddenly remembered the object of her visit down to the ford. She appeared to be alone on her side of the river. At the landing opposite, however, were two men, and presently Lucy recognized Joel Creech and his father. A second glance showed Indians with burros, evidently waiting for the boat.

Joel Creech jumped into a skiff and shoved off. The elder man seemed to be trying to prevent his son from leaving the shore. But Joel began to row upstream, keeping close to the shore. Lucy watched him. No doubt he had seen her and was coming across.

She saw the big flatboat sweep into line of sight at the same time Joel turned into the current. But while the larger craft drifted slowly the other way, the smaller one came swiftly down and across. Joel swept out of the current into the eddy, rowed across that, and slid the skiff up on the sand bar. Then he stepped out. He was bareheaded and barefooted.

"Are you lookin' fer me?" he shouted.

Lucy waved a hand for him to come up.

Then he approached. He was a tall, lean young man, stoop-shouldered and bowlegged from much riding, with sallow, freckled face, a thin fuzz of beard, weak mouth and chin, and eyes remarkable for their small size and piercing quality and different colors —for one was gray and the other was hazel. The irregularity of his features reminded one who knew that he had once been kicked in the face by a horse.

Creech came up hurriedly, in an eager, wild way that made Lucy suddenly pity him. He did not seem to remember that the stallion had an antipathy for him.

"Look out, Joel!" she called, and she gave the black's head a jerk. Sarchedon went up with a snort and came down pounding the sand. Quick as an Indian Lucy was out of the saddle.

"Lemme your quirt," said Joel, showing his teeth like a wolf.

"No. I wouldn't let you hit Sarch. You beat him once, and he's never forgotten," replied Lucy. She dropped the bridle and drew Joel over to a huge drift log, half buried in the sand. Here she sat down, but Joel remained standing.

"What'd you want?" asked Joel.

"I've heard a lot of things, Joel," replied Lucy, trying to think of just what she wanted to say.

"Reckon you have," said Joel dejectedly, and then he sat down on the log and dug holes in the sand with his bare feet.

Then Lucy told him, guardedly, a few of the rumors she had heard.

"All thet you say is nothin' to what's happened," he replied bitterly. "Them riders mocked the life an' soul out of

me, an' made me feel miserable."

"But, Joel, you shouldn't be so—so touchy," said Lucy, earnestly. "After all, the joke *was* on you. Why didn't you take it like a man?"

"But they knew you stole my clothes," he protested.

"Suppose they did. That wasn't much to care about. If you hadn't taken it so hard they'd have let up on you."

"Mebbe I might have stood that. But they taunted me with bein'—loony about you." Joel spoke huskily. There was no doubt that he had been deeply hurt.

"What'd you and Van fight about?" she asked presently.

Joel hung his head. "I reckon I ain't a-goin' to tell you."

"You said something about me?" Lucy could not resist her curiosity, back of which was a little heat. "It must have been—bad—or else Van wouldn't have struck you."

"He hit me—he knocked me flat," passionately said Joel.

"And you drew a gun on him?"

"I did, an' like a fool I didn't wait till I got up. Then he kicked me! Bostil's Ford will never be big enough fer me an' Van now."

"Don't talk foolish, Joel, maybe you deserved what you got. You say some—some rude things."

"I only said I'd pay you back," burst out Joel.

"How?"

"I swore I'd lay fer you—an' steal your clothes—so you'd have to run home naked."

"But, Joel, I don't go swimming in spring-holes," protested Lucy, divided between amusement and annoyance. "Is that all you said to provoke Van?"

"It's all, Lucy, I swear."

"I'm sorry, Joel. If you'd only had sense enough to stay out till after dark! But no use crying over spilt milk. Now, if you'll do your share I'll do mine. I'll tell the boys I was to blame. I'll persuade them to let you alone. I'll go to Muncie—"

"No you won't go cryin' small fer me!" blurted out Joel.

Lucy was surprised to see pride in him. "Joel, I'll not make it appear—"

"You'll not say one word about me to anyone," he went on, with the blood beginning to darken his face. "Lucy Bostil, there's been thet done an' said to me which I'll never forgive. I'm no good in Bostil's Ford. I'm no good! I'm no good! An' it's your fault!"

"Oh, Joel, what can I do?" cried Lucy.

"I reckon there's only one way you can square me," he replied, suddenly growing pale.

"How?" queried Lucy sharply.

"You can marry me. Thet'll show thet gang! An' it'll square me. Then I'll go to work an' I'll stick. Thet's all, Lucy Bostil."

"But, Joel, I can't marry you—even if I am to blame for your ruin," said Lucy simply.

"Why?"

"Because I don't love you."

"I reckon thet won't make any difference, if you don't love someone else."

Lucy gazed blankly at him. He began to shake, and his eyes grew wild. She rose from the log.

"Do you love anybody else?" he asked passionately.

"None of your business!" retorted Lucy.

"It's Van!" he said thickly.

"Joel, you're a fool!"

"So they all say. An' they got my

old man believin' it, too. Mebbe I am—but I'm a-goin' to kill Van!"

"No! No! Joel, what are you saying? I don't love Van. I don't care any more for him than for any other rider—or—or you."

"Thet's a lie, Lucy Bostil!"

"How dare you say I lie? I'm trying to make up for my blunder and you—you insult me!"

"You talk sweet—but talk isn't enough. You made me no good. Will you marry me?"

"I will not!" Then she turned her back, not from contempt, but to hurry away from him.

He leaped after her and grasped her with rude hands.

"Let me go!" cried Lucy, standing perfectly motionless. The hard clutch of his fingers roused a fierce, hot anger.

Joel did not heed her command. He was forcing her back. He talked incoherently. One glimpse of his face added terror to Lucy's fury.

"Joel, you're out of your head!" she cried, and she began to wrench and writhe out of his grasp. Then ensued a short, sharp struggle. Joel could not hold Lucy, but he tore her blouse into shreds. She broke free from him, and he lunged at her again. With all her strength she lashed his face with the heavy leather quirt. That staggered him. He almost fell.

Lucy bounded to Sarchedon. In a flash she was up in the saddle. Joel was running toward her.

"Stop!" cried Lucy fiercely. "I'll run you down!"

The big black plunged at a touch of spur and came down quivering, ready to bolt.

Creech swerved to one side. His face was lividly white except where the bloody welts crossed it. His jaw seemed to hang loosely, making speech difficult.

"Jest fer—thet—" he panted hoarsely, "I'll lay fer you—an' I'll strip you—an' I'll tie you on a hoss—an' I'll drive you naked through Bostil's Ford!"

Lucy saw the utter futility of all her good intentions. For the second time she touched a spur to Sarchedon. He leaped out, flashed past Creech, and thundered up the road. It was all Lucy could do to break his gait at the first steep rise.

Chapter Four

The Wild-Horse Hunter

THREE wild-horse hunters made camp one night beside a little stream in the Sevier Valley, 500 miles, as a crow flies, from Bostil's Ford.

These hunters had a poor outfit, excepting, of course, their horses. They were young men, rangy in build, lean and hard from life in the saddle, bronzed like Indians, still-faced and keen-eyed. Two of them appeared to be tired out, and lagged at the campfire duties.

The shades of night fell swiftly, and it was dark by the time the hunters finished their meal. Then the campfire had burned low. One of the three dragged branches of dead cedars and replenished the fire.

"I reckon a pipe would help me make up my mind," said one of the two tired hunters.

"Wal, Bill," replied the other dryly, "your mind's made up, else you'd not say smoke."

"Why?"

"Because there ain't three pipefuls

of thet precious tobacco left."

"Thet's one apiece, then. Lin, come an' smoke the last pipe with us."

The tallest of the three, he who had brought the firewood, stood in the bright light of the blaze. He looked the born rider, light, lithe, powerful. "Sure, I'll smoke," he replied.

Then presently he accepted the pipe tendered him, and, sitting down beside the fire, he composed himself to the enjoyment which his companions evidently considered worthy of a decision they had reached.

"So this smokin' means you both want to turn back?" queried Lin, his sharp gaze glancing darkly bright in the glow of the fire.

"Yep, we'll turn back. An', Lordy, the relief I feel!" replied one.

"We've been long comin' to it, Lin, an' thet was for your sake," replied the other.

Lin slowly pulled at his pipe and blew out the smoke as if reluctant to part with it. "Let's go on," he said quietly.

"No. I've had all I want of chasin' thet damn wild stallion," returned Bill shortly.

The other spread wide his hands and bent an expostulating look upon the one called Lin. "We're two hundred miles out," he said. "There's only a little flour left in the bag. No coffee! Only a little salt! All the hosses except your big Nagger are played out. We're already in strange country. An' you know what we've heerd of this an' all to the south. It's all canyons, an' somewheres down there is thet awful canyon none of our people ever seen. But we've heerd of it. An awful cut-up country."

Lin was silent, as if impressed.

Bill raised a strong, lean, brown hand in a forcible gesture. "We can't ketch Wildfire!"

"Bill is sure right, if I'm wrong, which I ain't," went on the other. "Lin, we've trailed thet wild stallion for six weeks. We've tried every trick we know on him. An' he's too smart for us. There's a hoss! Why, Lin, we're all but gone to the dogs chasin' Wildfire. An' now I'm done, an' I'm glad of it."

There was another short silence, which presently Bill broke. "Lin, it makes me sick to quit. I ain't denyin' thet for a long time I've had hopes of ketchin' Wildfire. He's the grandest hoss I ever laid eyes on. I reckon no man, onless he was an Arab, ever seen as good a one. But now, thet's neither here nor there. We've got to hit the back trail."

"Boys, I reckon I'll stick to Wildfire's tracks," said Lin in the same quiet tone.

"Lin Slone, are you gone plumb crazy over thet red hoss?"

"I—reckon," replied Slone. The working of his throat as he swallowed could be plainly seen by his companions.

Bill looked at his ally as if to confirm some sudden understanding between them. For them the situation subtly changed. For weeks they had been three wild-horse wranglers on a hard chase after a valuable stallion. They had failed to get even close to him. They had gone to the limit of their endurance and of the outfit, and it was time to turn back. But Slone had conceived that strange and rare longing for a horse—a passion understood, if not shared, by all riders. And they knew that he would catch Wildfire or die in the attempt.

"I tell you, Lin," said Bill, "your hoss Nagger's as good as when we

started. Lin, have you got an extra set of shoes for him?"

"No full set. Only three left," replied Lin soberly.

"Wal, thet's enough. You can keep Nagger shod. An' *mebbe* thet red stallion will get sore feet an' go lame. Then you'd stand a chance."

"But Wildfire keeps travelin' the valleys—the soft ground," said Slone.

"No matter. He's leavin' the country, an' he's bound to strike sandstone sooner or later. Then, by gosh, mebbe he'll wear off them hoofs."

"Boys, do you think he's leavin' the country?" inquired Slone anxiously.

"Sure he is," replied Bill. "He ain't the first stallion I've chased off the Sevier range. An' I know. It's a stallion thet makes for new country, when you push him hard."

"Yep, Lin, he's sure leavin'," added the other comrade. "Why, he's traveled a beeline for days! I'll bet he's seen us many a time. Wildfire's about as smart as any man. He was born wild, an' his dam was born wild, an' there you have it. He has killed stallions all over the Sevier range. A wild stallion thet's a killer! Could he be broke?"

"I'll break him," said Slone grimly. "It's gettin' him thet's the job. I've got patience to break a hoss. But patience can't catch a streak of lightnin'."

"Nope; you're right," replied Bill. "If you have some luck you'll get him—mebbe. If he wears out his feet, or if you crowd him into a narrow canyon, or run him into a bad place where he can't get by you. Thet might happen. An' then, with Nagger, you stand a chance. Did you ever tire thet hoss?"

"Not yet. He could run hard fifty miles—mebbe more."

"Lin, if Wildfire gives you the slip he'll have to fly. You've got the best eyes for tracks of any wrangler in Utah."

Slone accepted the compliment with a fleeting, doubtful smile on his dark face. He did not reply, and no more was said by his comrades. They rolled with backs to the fire. Slone put on more wood, for the keen wind was cold and cutting; and then he lay down with a goatskin under him and a saddle blanket over him. All three were soon asleep.

The Stewart brothers were wild-horse hunters for the sake of trades and occasional sales. But Lin Slone never traded nor sold a horse he had captured. The excitement of the game, and the lure of the desert, and the love of a horse were what kept him at the profitless work. His type was rare in the uplands.

These were the early days of the settlement of Utah, and only a few of the hardiest and most adventurous pioneers had penetrated the desert in the southern part of that vast upland. And with them ventured some of that wild breed of riders to which Slone and the Stewarts belonged.

Lin Slone awoke next morning and rolled out of his blanket at his usual early hour. But he was not early enough to say good-by to the Stewarts. They were gone.

They had left him more than his share of the outfit, and perhaps that was why they had slipped off before dawn. They knew him well enough to know that he would not have accepted it.

Slone looked away to the west. "Good-by," he said, and he spoke as if he was saying good-by to more than comrades. "I reckon I won't see Sevier Village soon again—an' maybe never,"

he soliloquized.

Slone turned his attention to the pack of supplies. The Stewarts had divided the flour and the parched corn equally, and unless he was greatly mistaken they had left him most of the coffee and all of the salt.

Then he swiftly set about kindling a fire and getting a meal. In the midst of his task he heard the whistle of his horse. "Good old Nagger!" he said. "I shore won't have to track you this mornin'."

Presently he went off into the cedars to find Nagger and the mustang that he used to carry a pack. Nagger was grazing in a little open patch among the trees, but the pack horse was missing. Slone seemed to know in what direction to go to find the trail, for he came upon it very soon. The pack horse wore hobbles, and Slone found him standing quietly in a clump of cedars. Nagger caught sight of his master and came at his call.

This big horse Nagger appeared as unique in his class as Slone was among riders. Nagger seemed of several colors, though black predominated. His coat was shaggy, almost woolly, like that of a sheep. He was huge, rawboned, knotty, long of body and long of leg, with the head of a war charger.

Slone discarded the pack saddle and bags. The latter were almost empty. He roped the tarpaulin on the back of the mustang, and, making a small bundle of his few supplies, he tied that to the tarpaulin. His blanket he used for a saddle blanket on Nagger. Of the utensils left by the Stewarts he chose a couple of small iron pans, with long handles. The rest he left. In his saddlebags he had a few extra horseshoes, some nails, bullets for his rifle, and a knife with a heavy blade.

"Not a rich outfit for a far country," he mused. Then he mounted and rode down the gradual slope, facing the valley and the black, bold, flat mountain to the southeast. Some few hundred yards from camp he halted Nagger and bent over in the saddle to scrutinize the ground.

The clean-cut track of a horse showed in the bare, hard sand. The hoof marks were large, almost oval, perfect in shape, and manifestly they were beautiful to Lin Slone. He gazed at them for a long time, and then he looked across the dotted red valley up the vast ridgy steps, toward the black plateau and beyond.

Then Slone slipped off the saddle and knelt to scrutinize the horse tracks. A little sand had blown into the depressions, and some of it was wet and some of it dry. He took his time about examining it, and he even tried gently blowing other sand into the tracks, to compare that with what was already there. Finally he stood up and addressed Nagger.

"Reckon we won't have to argue with Abe an' Bill this mornin'," he said with satisfaction. "Wildfire made that track yesterday, before sunup."

Thereupon Slone remounted and put Nagger to a trot. The pack horse followed with an alacrity that showed he had no desire for loneliness.

As straight as a beeline Wildfire had left a trail down into the floor of the valley. He had not stopped to graze, and he had not looked for water. Slone had hoped to find a water hole in one of the deep washes in the red earth, but if there had been any water there Wildfire would have scented it. He had not had a drink for three days that Slone knew of. Nagger had not drunk for 40 hours. Slone had a canvas water

bag hanging over the pommel, but it was a habit of his to deny himself, as far as possible, till his horse could drink also. Like an Indian, Slone ate and drank but little.

It took four hours of steady trotting to reach the middle and bottom of that wide, flat valley. A network of washes cut up the whole center of it, and they were all as dry as bleached bone. To cross these Slone had only to keep Wildfire's trail.

It was hot down in the lowland. The heat struck up, reflected from the sand. But it was a March sun, and no more than pleasant to Slone. The wind rose, however, and blew dust and sand in the faces of horse and rider. Except lizards, Slone did not see any living things.

Miles of low greasewood and sparse yellow sage led to the first almost imperceptible rise of the valley floor on that side. The distant cedars beckoned to Slone. He was not patient, because he was on the trail of Wildfire, but nevertheless the hours seemed short.

For Slone an ever-present and growing fascination lay in Wildfire's clear, sharply defined tracks. It was as if every hoof mark told him something. Once, far up the interminable ascent, he found on a ridge top tracks showing where Wildfire had halted and turned.

"Ha, Nagger!" cried Slone exultingly. "Look there! He's begun facin' about. He's wonderin' if we're still after him. He's worried. But we'll keep out of sight—a day behind."

When Slone reached the cedars the sun was low down in the west. He looked back across the 50 miles of valley to the colored cliffs and walls. He seemed to be above them now, and the cool air, with tang of cedar and juniper, strengthened the impression that he had climbed high.

A mile or more ahead of him rose a gray cliff with breaks in it and a line of dark cedars or piñons on the level rims. He believed these breaks to be the mouths of canyons, and so it turned out. Wildfire's trail led into the mouth of a narrow canyon with very steep and high walls. Nagger snorted his perception of water, and the mustang whistled. Wildfire's tracks led to a point under the wall where a spring gushed forth. There were mountain-lion and deer tracks also, as well as those of smaller game.

Slone made camp here. The mustang was tired. But Nagger, upon taking a long drink, rolled in the grass as if he had just begun the trip. After eating, Slone took his rifle and went out to look for deer. But there appeared to be none at hand. He came across many lion tracks and saw with apprehension where one had taken Wildfire's trail.

It bothered Slone a little that he was getting into a lion country. Nagger showed nervousness, something unusual for him. Slone tied both horses with long halters and stationed them on patches of thick grass. Then he put a cedar stump on the fire and went to sleep. Upon awakening and going to the spring he was somewhat chagrined to see that deer had come down to drink early. Evidently they were numerous. A lion country is always a deer country, for the lions follow the deer.

Slone was packed and saddled and on his way before the sun reddened the canyon wall. He walked the horses. From time to time he saw signs of Wildfire's consistent progress. The canyon narrowed and the walls grew lower and the grass increased. There was a decided ascent all the time. Slone could find no evidence that the canyon

had ever been traveled by hunters or Indians.

The day was pleasant and warm and still. Toward the middle of the afternoon, coming to a place where Wildfire had taken to a trot, he put Nagger to that gait, and by sundown had worked up to where the canyon was only a shallow ravine. And finally it turned once more, to lose itself in a level where straggling pines stood high above the cedars, and great, dark-green silver spruces stood above the pines. Here were patches of sage, fresh and pungent, and long reaches of bleached grass. It was the edge of a forest.

Wildfire's trail went on. Slone came at length to a group of pines, and here he found the remains of a campfire, and some flint arrowheads. Indians had been in there, probably having come from the opposite direction to Slone's. This encouraged him, for where Indians could hunt so could he. Soon he was entering a forest where cedars and piñons and pines began to grow thickly. Presently he came upon a faintly defined trail, just a dim, dark line even to an experienced eye. But it was a trail, and Wildfire had taken it.

Slone halted for the night. The air was cold, and the dampness of it gave him an idea there were snowbanks somewhere not far distant. The dew was already heavy on the grass. He hobbled the horses and put a bell on Nagger. A bell might frighten lions that had never heard one. Then he built a fire and cooked his meal.

It had been long since he had camped high up among the pines. The sough of the wind pleased him, like music. There had begun to be prospects of pleasant experience along with the toil of chasing Wildfire. He was entering new and strange and beautiful country. How far might the chase take him? He did not care. He was not sleepy, but even if he had been it developed that he must wait till the coyotes ceased their barking round his campfire. They came so close that he saw their gray shadows in the gloom. But presently they wearied of yelping at him and went away.

Chapter Five

Into the Canyon

IN THE early morning when all was gray and the big, dark pines were shadowy specters, Slone was awakened by the cold. His hands were so numb that he had difficulty starting a fire. He stood over the blaze, warming them. The air was nipping, clear and thin, and sweet with frosty fragrance.

Daylight came while he was in the midst of his morning meal. A white frost covered the ground and crackled under his feet as he went out to bring in the horses. He saw fresh deer tracks. Then he went back to camp for his rifle. Keeping a sharp lookout for game, he continued his search for the horses.

The forest was open and parklike. There were no fallen trees or evidences of fire. Presently he came to a wide glade in the midst of which Nagger and the pack mustang were grazing with a herd of deer. They were so tame they stood facing him curiously, with long ears erect.

It was sheer murder to kill a deer standing and watching like that, but Slone was out of meat and hungry and facing a long, hard trip. He shot a

buck, which leaped spasmodically away, trying to follow the herd, and fell at the edge of the glade. Slone cut out a haunch, and then, catching the horses, he returned to camp, where he packed and saddled, and at once rode out on the dim trail.

Slone could see ahead and on each side several hundred yards, and presently he ascertained that the forest floor was not so level as he had supposed. He had entered a valley or was traversing a wide, gently sloping pass. He went through thickets of juniper, and had to go around clumps of quaking asp. The pines grew larger and farther apart. Cedars and piñons had been left behind, and he had met with no silver spruces after leaving camp. Probably that point was the height of a divide. There were banks of snow in some of the hollows on the north side.

Slone came, presently, upon a lion track in the trail, made probably a day before. Slone grew curious about it, seeing how it held, as he was holding, to Wildfire's tracks. After a mile or so he made sure the lion had been trailing the stallion, and for a second he felt a cold contraction of his heart.

The sun rose, melting the frost, and a breath of warm air, laden with the scent of pine, moved heavily under the huge yellow trees. Slone passed a point where the remains of an old campfire and a pile of deer antlers were further proof that Indians visited this plateau to hunt. From this camp broader, more deeply defined trails led away to the south and east. Slone kept to the east trail, in which Wildfire's tracks and those of the lion showed clearly. It was about the middle of the forenoon when the tracks of the stallion and lion left the trail to lead up a little draw where grass grew thick. Slone follow-

ed, reading the signs of Wildfire's progress and the action of his pursuer, as well as if he had seen them.

Here the stallion had plowed into a snowbank, eating a hole two feet deep; then he had grazed around a little; then on and on; there his splendid tracks were deep in the soft earth. Slone knew what to expect when the track of the lion veered from those of the horse, and he followed the lion tracks. The ground was soft from the late melting of snow, and Nagger sank deep. The lion left a plain track. Here he stole along; there he left many tracks at a point where he might have halted to make sure of his scent. He was circling on the trail of the stallion, with cunning intent of ambush.

The end of this slow, careful stalk of the lion, as told in his tracks, came upon the edge of a knoll where he had crouched to watch and wait. From this perch he had made a magnificent spring—Slone estimating it to be 40 feet—but he had missed the stallion. There were Wildfire's tracks again, slow and short, and then deep and sharp where in the impetus of fright he had sprung out of reach. A second leap of the lion, and then lessening bounds, and finally an abrupt turn

from Wildfire's trail told the futility of that stalk. Slone made certain that Wildfire was so keen that as he grazed along he had kept to open ground.

Wildfire had run for a mile, then slowed down to a trot, and he had circled to get back to the trail he had left. Slone believed the horse was just that intelligent. At any rate, Wildfire struck the trail again and turned at right angles to follow it.

Here the forest floor appeared perfectly level. Patches of snow became frequent and larger as Slone went on. At length the patches closed up, and soon extended as far as he could see. It was soft, affording difficult travel. Slone crossed hundreds of deer tracks, and the trail he was on eventually became a deer runway.

Presently, far down one of the aisles between the great pines, Slone saw what appeared to be a yellow cliff, far away. It puzzled him. And as he went on he received the impression that the forest dropped out of sight ahead. Then the trees grew thicker, obstructing his view. The trail was soggy and he had to help his horse. The mustang floundered in the soft snow. Cedars and piñons appeared again, making travel still more laborious.

All at once Slone had a sensation that seemed a strange blend of light and wind and space and void. On the instant his horse halted with a snort. Slone quickly looked up. Had he come to the end of the world? An abyss, a canyon, yawned beneath him, beyond all comparison in its greatness.

His keen eye, educated to desert distance and dimension, swept down and across, taking in the tremendous truth, before it staggered his comprehension. But a second sweeping glance, slower, becoming intoxicated with what it beheld, saw gigantic cliff-steps and yellow slopes dotted with cedars, leading down to clefts filled with purple smoke, and these led on and on to a ragged red world of rock, bare, shining, bold, uplifted in mesa, dome, peak, and crag, clear and strange in the morning light, still and sleeping like death.

This, then, was the great canyon, which had seemed like a hunter's fable rather than truth. Slone looked again and again, until he was confounded by the vastness and the grandeur and the vague sadness of the scene.

The deer trail led down through a break in the wall. Only a few rods of it could be seen. This trail was passable, even though choked with snow. But the depth beyond this wall seemed to fascinate Slone and hold him back, used as he was to desert trails. Then the clean mark of Wildfire's hoof brought back the old thrill.

"This place fits you, Wildfire," muttered Stone, dismounting.

He started down, leading Nagger. The mustang followed. Slone kept to the wall side of the trail, fearing the horses might slip. The snow held firmly at first and Slone had no trouble. The gap in the rimrock widened to a slope thickly grown over with cedars and piñons and manzanita. This growth made the descent more laborious, yet afforded means at least for Slone to go down with less danger.

There was no stopping. Once started, the horses had to keep on. Slone saw the impossibility of ever climbing out while that snow was there. The trail zigzagged down and down. Very soon the yellow wall hung tremendously over him, straight up. The snow became thinner and softer. The horses

began to slip. They slid on their haunches. Fortunately the slope grew less steep, and Slone could see below where it reached out to comparatively level ground. Still, a mishap might yet occur. Slone kept as close to Nagger as possible, helping him whenever he could. The mustang slipped, rolled over, and then slipped past Slone, went down the slope to bring up in a cedar. Slone worked down to him and extricated him.

Then the huge Nagger began to slide. Snow and loose rock slid with him, and so did Slone. The little avalanche stopped of its own accord, and Slone dragged Nagger on down and down, presently to come to the end of the steep descent.

Here cedars and piñons grew thickly enough to make a forest. The snow thinned out to patches, and then failed. But the going remained bad for a while as the horses sank deep in a soft red earth. This eventually grew more solid and finally dry. Slone worked out of the cedars to what appeared a grassy plateau inclosed by the great green and white slope with its yellow wall overhanging, and distant mesas and cliffs. Here his view was restricted. He was down on the first bench of the great canyon. There was the deer trail, a well-worn path keeping to the edge of the slope. Slone came to a deep cut in the earth, and the trail headed it where it began at the last descent of the slope. The trail swung to the left, then presently climbed to a higher bench. Here were brush and grass and huge patches of sage, so pungent that it stung Slone's nostrils. Then he went down again, this time to come to a clear brook lined by willows.

The horses drank long and Slone refreshed himself. The sun had grown hot. Most of the time his view was shut off, but occasionally he reached a point where through some break he saw towers gleaming red in the sun. A strange place, of silence and smoky veils in the distance. Time passed swiftly. Toward the waning of the afternoon he began to climb what might be a saddle of land connecting the canyon wall on the left with a great plateau, rising more and more in his way as he advanced.

At sunset Slone was more shut in than for several hours. The slope was gradual up to this pass to the saddle, and upon coming to a spring and the first pine trees he decided to halt for a camp. The mustang was almost exhausted.

Thereupon he hobbled the horses in the luxuriant grass round the spring, and then unrolled his pack. Once as dusk came stealing down, while he was eating his meal, Nagger whistled in fright. Slone saw a gray, pantherish form gliding away into the shadows. He took a quick shot at it, but missed.

"It's a lion country, all right," he said. And then he set about building a big fire on the other side of the grassy plot, to have the horses between fires. He cut all the venison into thin strips, and spent an hour roasting them. Then he lay down to rest.

In the gray dawn he arose refreshed. The horses were restive. Nagger snorted a welcome. Evidently they had passed an uneasy night. Slone found lion tracks at the spring and in sandy places. Presently he was on his way up to the notch between the great wall and the plateau. A growth of thick scrub oak made travel difficult. It had not appeared far up to that saddle, but it was far. There were straggling pine trees and huge rocks that obstructed

his gaze. But once up he saw that the saddle was only a narrow ridge, curved to slope up on both sides.

Straight before Slone and under him opened the canyon, blazing and glorious along the peaks and ramparts where the rising sun struck, misty and smoky and shadowy down in those mysterious depths.

Slone turned to the trail he saw leading down, which was very steep and rough. Wildfire had paced to and fro, making many tracks, before he had headed down again.

Dismounting, Slone took Nagger's bridle and started down. The mustang, after snorting and pawing the earth, followed.

The trail led down under a cedar-fringed precipice. It was cruel to put a horse to it, but Nagger was sure-footed. Gradually Slone worked down and away from the bulging wall. It was hard, rough going, miles of slow zigzag trailing down out of the cedars. Then they reached a ravine.

The ravine became a canyon, at its head a dry wash full of rocks and gravel. Water appeared from under a cliff; augmented by other springs, it soon became a brook. Gradually the cleft became cool and shady, luxuriant with grass and flowers.

Four hours of turning and twisting over boulders and banks finished the pack horse, and Slone left him in a long reach of canyon where grass and water never failed. Slone stopped here for the noon hour, letting Nagger have his fill of the rich grazing. All the outfit except what was on the saddle, the sack with the few pounds of meat and supplies, and the two utensils, he left before resuming his journey.

Presently he came to where Wildfire had doubled on his trail and turned up a side canyon. Climbing out, Slone found himself on a wide, barren plateau, shut in by great walls and mesas of colored rock. The sun beat down fiercely and a blast of furnace-hot wind, laden with red dust, swept across the plateau.

By and by only isolated mescal plants broke the bare monotony of the plateau. They passed from red sand and gravel to a red soft shale, thence to hard red rock where Wildfire's tracks were lost. Slone let Nagger pick the way, which grew harder and harder.

This bare rock would soon wear Wildfire's hoofs thin. Slone rejoiced. He began to look far ahead, beginning to believe that he might see his quarry.

It became necessary to climb in and out of gullies. Slone kept on doggedly. The stretch of broken plateau before him grew wilder and bolder of outline; progress grew slower, more dangerous.

The plateau appeared to be ending in a series of great capes or promontories. Slone felt relieved down in the gullies, where he could not see far. Presently he climbed out of one from which there extended a narrow ledge with a slant too perilous for any horse. He stepped out upon that with far less confidence than Nagger. To the right was a bulge of low wall, and a few feet to the left a dark precipice.

The trail here was faintly outlined, and it was six inches wide and slanting as well. It seemed endless to Slone, that ledge. He looked only down at his feet and listened to Nagger's steps. That ledge extended in a long curve, turning slowly away from the precipice, and ascending a little at the farther end. Slone drew a deep breath of relief when he finally led Nagger up

on a stretch of level rock.

Suddenly a strange yet familiar sound halted Slone, as if he had been struck. The wild, shrill, high-pitched, piercing whistle of a stallion! Nagger neighed a blast in reply and pounded the rock with his iron-shod hoofs. With a thrill Slone looked ahead.

There, some few hundred yards distant, on a promontory, stood a red horse.

"My Lord! It's Wildfire!" breathed Slone tensely.

Wildfire was as red as fire. His long mane, wild in the wind, was like a whipping, black-streaked flame. Silhouetted there against that canyon background he seemed gigantic, a demon horse, ready to plunge into fiery depths. He was looking back over his shoulder, his head very high, and every line of him was instinct with wildness.

Again he sent out that shrill, air-splitting whistle. Slone understood it to be a clarion call to Nagger. If Nagger had been alone Wildfire would have killed him. Nagger understood this, too, for he whistled back in rage and terror. It took an iron arm to hold him. Then Wildfire plunged, apparently down, and vanished from Slone's sight.

Slone hurried onward, to be blocked by a huge crack in the rocky plateau. This he had to head. And then another and like obstacle checked his haste to reach that promontory. He was forced to go more slowly. Wildfire had been close only as to sight.

Climbing down and up, toiling on, he at last learned patience. He had seen Wildfire at close range. That was enough. It took an hour of work to reach the point where Wildfire had disappeared.

A promontory indeed it was, overhanging a valley 1,000 feet below. A white torrent of a stream wound through it. There were lines of green cottonwoods following the winding course. Then Slone saw Wildfire slowly crossing the flat toward the stream. He had gone down that cliff, which to Slone looked perpendicular.

Wildfire appeared to be walking lame. Slone, making sure of this, suffered a pang. Then, when the significance of such lameness dawned upon him he whooped his wild joy and waved his hat. The red stallion must have heard, for he looked up. Then he went on again and waded into the stream, where he drank long. When he started to cross, the swift current drove him back in several places. The water wreathed white around him. But evidently it was not deep, and finally he crossed. From the other side he looked up again at Nagger and Slone, and, going on, he soon was out of sight in the cottonwoods.

"How to get down!" muttered Slone.

There was a break in the cliff wall, a bare stone slant where horses had gone down and come up. Slone had never seen a trail as perilous as this. As riding was impossible, he went before. If the horse slipped there would be a double tragedy, for Nagger would knock his master off the cliff. Slone set his teeth and stepped down.

The break in the wall led to a ledge, and the ledge dropped from step to step, with bare, slippery slants between. Nagger crashed down over the stone steps, both front hoofs at once. The slants he slid down on his haunches with his forelegs stiff and the iron shoes scraping. He snorted and heaved and grew wet with sweat. He tossed and shook his head from

side to side at some of the places.

Whenever Slone came to corrugated stretches in the trail he felt grateful. But these were few. The rock was like smooth red iron. But Nagger never faltered. Many times he slipped, often with both front feet, but never with all four feet. So he did not fall. And the red wall began to loom above Slone.

Suddenly he seemed brought to a point where it was impossible to descend. It was a round bulge, slanting fearfully, with only a few little rough surfaces to hold a foot. Wildfire had left a broad, clear-swept mark at that place, and red hairs on some of the sharp points. He had slid down. Below was an offset that fortunately prevented further sliding. Slone started to walk down this place, but when Nagger began to slide Slone had to let go the bridle and jump. Both he and the horse landed safely.

They went on, down and down, to reach the base of the great wall, scraped and exhausted, wet with sweat, but unhurt. Slone hugged and petted the horse. Then he led on to the roaring stream.

It was green water, white with foam. Slone waded in and found the water cool and shallow and very swift. He had to hold to Nagger to keep from being swept downstream. They crossed in safety. There in the sand showed Wildfire's tracks.

The trail crossed the stream at every turn of the twisting, narrow valley. Slone enjoyed getting into the water. He hung his gun over the pommel and let the water roll him. A dozen times he and Nagger forded the rushing torrent. Then they came to a boxlike closing of the valley to canyon walls, and here the trail evidently followed the stream bed. Slone waded in, and stumbled, rolled, and floated ahead of the sturdy horse. Nagger was wet to his breast, but he did not fall. This gulch seemed full of a hollow rushing roar. It opened out into a wide valley. Wildfire's tracks took to the left side and began to climb the slope.

Here the traveling was good, considering what had been passed. Once up out of the valley floor Slone saw Wildfire far ahead, high on the slope. He did not appear to be limping, but he was not going fast. Slone watched as he climbed.

At last from the height of slope Wildfire appeared, looking back and down. Then he was gone. Slone plodded upward. Long before he reached that summit he heard the dull rumble of the river. It grew to be a roar, yet it seemed distant.

Slone surmounted the ridge, to find the canyon opening in a tremendous gap, and to see down, far down, a glittering, sun-blasted slope merging into a deep, black gulch where a red river swept and chafed and roared.

Somehow the river was what he had expected to see. A force that had cut and ground this canyon could have been nothing but a river like that. The trail led down, and Slone had no doubt that it crossed the river and led up out of the canyon.

At length he began the descent. As he proceeded it seemed that the roar of the river lessened. He could not understand why this was so. It took half an hour to reach the last level, a ghastly, black, and iron-ribbed canyon bed, with the river splitting it. He had not had a glimpse of Wildfire on this side of the divide, but he found his tracks, and they led down off the last level, through a notch in the black bank of

marble to a sand bar and the river.

Wildfire had walked straight off the sand into the water. Slone studied the river and shore. The water ran slow, heavily, in sluggish eddies. From far up the canyon came the roar of a rapid, and from below the roar of another, heavier and closer. The river appeared tremendous, in ways Slone felt rather than realized, yet it was not swift. Studying the black, rough wall of rock above him, he saw marks where the river had been 60 feet higher than where he stood on the sand. He piled and tied his supplies and weapons high on the saddle, to keep them dry, and looked for a place to take to the water.

The big horse plunged, almost going under, and began to swim. Slone kept upstream beside him. He found presently that the water was thick and made him tired, so it was necessary to grasp a stirrup and be towed. Nagger labored heavily near the opposite shore; still, he landed safely upon a rocky bank. There were patches of sand in which Wildfire's tracks showed so fresh that the water had not yet dried out of them.

Slone rested his horse before attempting to climb out of that split in the rock. However, Wildfire had found an easy ascent. On this side of the canyon the bare rock did not predominate. A clear trail led up a dusty, gravelly slope upon which scant greasewood and cactus appeared. Half an hour's climbing brought Slone to where he could see that he was entering a vast valley, sloping up and narrowing to a notch in the dark cliffs.

And scarcely a mile distant, bright in the westering sunlight, shone the red stallion, moving slowly.

Slone pressed on steadily. Just before dark he came to an ideal spot to camp. The valley had closed up, so that the lofty walls cast shadows that met. A clump of cottonwoods surrounding a spring, abundance of rich grass, willows and flowers lining the banks formed an oasis in the bare valley.

That night's sleep was as a moment. He opened his eyes to see the crags and towers and peaks and domes, and the lofty walls of that vast, broken chaos of canyons across the river. They were now emerging from the misty gray of dawn, growing pink and lilac and purple.

He arose and set about his few tasks, which, being soon finished, allowed him an early start.

Wildfire had grazed along no more than a mile in the lead. Slone looked eagerly up the narrowing canyon, but he was not rewarded by a sight of the stallion. As he progressed up a gradually ascending trail he became aware of the fact that the notch he had long looked up to was where the great red walls closed in and almost met. And the trail zigzagged up this narrow vent, so steep that only a few steps could be taken without rest.

Slone toiled up for an hour—an age—till he was wet, burning, choked, with a great weight on his chest. Yet still he was only halfway up that awful break between the walls. As he got farther up the notch widened.

Slone rested often. Nagger appreciated this and heaved gratefully at every halt. In this monotonous toil Slone forgot the zest of his pursuit. And when Nagger suddenly snorted in fright Slone was not prepared for what he saw.

Above him ran a low, red wall, around which evidently the trail led. At the curve, which was a promontory,

scarcely 100 feet in an airline above him, he saw something red moving, bobbing, coming out into view. It was a horse.

Wildfire—no farther away than the length of three lassos!

There he stood looking down. He fullfilled all of Slone's dreams. Only he was bigger. But he was so magnificently proportioned that he did not seem heavy. His coat was shaggy and red. It was not glossy. The color was what made him shine. His mane was like a crest, mounting, then falling low. Slone had never seen so much muscle on a horse. Yet his outline was graceful, beautiful. The head was beautiful, savage, splendid.

Slone shook a gauntleted fist at the stallion, as if the horse were human. Wildfire turned away, showed bright against the dark background, and then disappeared.

Chapter Six

Trapped!

SLONE saw no more of Wildfire for three days. It took all of this day to climb out of the canyon. The second was a slow march of 30 miles into a scrub cedar and piñon forest, through which the great red and yellow walls of the canyon could be seen. That night Slone found a water hole in a rocky pocket and a little grass for Nagger.

The third day's travel consisted of 40 miles or more through level pine forest, dry and odorous, but lacking the freshness and beauty of the forest on the north side of the canyon. Slone camped this night at a muddy pond in the woods, where Wildfire's tracks showed plainly.

On the following day Slone rode out of the forest into a country of scanty cedars, bleached and stunted, and out of this to the edge of a plateau, from which the shimmering desert flung its vast and desolate distances, forbidding and menacing. But it did not daunt Slone, for far down on the bare, billowing ridges moved a red speck, at a snail's pace, a slowly moving dot of color which was Wildfire.

On open ground like this, Nagger, carrying 250 pounds, showed his wonderful quality. He did not mind the heat nor the sand nor the glare nor the distance nor his burden. He did not tire. He was an engine of tremendous power.

Slone gained upon Wildfire, and toward evening of that day he reached to within a half mile of the stallion. And he chose to keep that far behind. That night he camped where there was dry grass, but no water.

Next day Slone made 50 miles, and gained the valley bed, where a slender stream ran thin and spread over a wide sandy bottom.

The following day he crossed, and the tracks of Wildfire were still wet on the sand bars. The stallion was slowing down. Slone saw him, limping along, not far in advance. There was a ten-mile stretch of level ground, blown hard as rock, from which the sustenance had been bleached, for not a spear of grass grew there. And following that was a passage through a weird region of clay dunes, blue and violet and heliotrope and lavender, all worn smooth by rain and wind.

Wildfire favored the soft ground now. He had deviated from his straight course. He was partial to washes and

dips in the earth where water might have lodged. And he was not now scornful of a green-scummed water hole with its white margin of alkali.

That night Slone made camp with Wildfire in plain sight. The stallion stopped when his pursuers stopped. And he began to graze on the same stretch with Nagger.

Next morning Wildfire was not in sight, but he had left his tracks in the sand. Slone trailed him with Nagger at a trot. Toward the head of this sandy flat Slone came upon old cornfields, and a broken dam where the water had been stored, and well-defined trails leading away to the right. Somewhere over there in the desert lived Indians.

At this point Wildfire abandoned the trail he had followed for many days and cut out more to the north. It took all the morning hours to climb three great steps and benches that led up to the summit of a mesa, vast in extent.

Then two more days of sand and another day of a slowly rising ground growing from bare to gray and gray to green, and then to the purple of sage and cedar—these three grinding days were toiled out with only one water hole.

Wildfire was lame and in distress and Nagger was growing gaunt and showing strain; and Slone, haggard and black and worn, plodded miles and miles on foot to save his horse.

There came a morning when Slone climbed to a cedared plateau that rose for a whole day's travel, and then split into a labyrinthine maze of canyons. There were trees, grass, water. It was a high country, cool and wild, like the uplands he had left. For days he camped on Wildfire's trail, always relentlessly driving him, always watching for the trap he hoped to find.

The red stallion spent much of his time of flight in looking backward. Whenever Slone came in sight of him he had his head over his shoulder, watching. And on the soft ground of these canyons he had begun to recover from his lameness. But this did not worry Slone. Sooner or later Wildfire would go down into a high-walled wash, from which there would be no outlet; or he would wander into a box-canyon; or he would climb out on a mesa with no place to descend, unless he passed Slone; or he would get cornered on a soft, steep slope where his hoofs would sink and make him slow.

The nature of the country had changed. Slone had entered a region, the like of which he had not seen—a high plateau crisscrossed in every direction by narrow canyons with red walls a thousand feet high. And one of the strange turning canyons opened into a vast valley of monuments.

The plateau had weathered and washed away, leaving huge sections of stone walls, all standing isolated, different in size and shape, but all clean-cut, bold, with straight lines. They stood up everywhere, monumental, towering, many-colored, lending a singular and beautiful aspect to the great green and gray valley, billowing away to the north, where dim, broken battlements mounted to the clouds.

The only living thing in Slone's sight was Wildfire. He shone red down on the green slope.

Slone rode down the slope, out upon the billowing floor of the valley. Wildfire looked back to see his pursuers, and then the solemn stillness broke to a wild, piercing whistle.

Day after day, camping where night found him, Slone followed the stallion, never losing sight of him till darkness had fallen. Slone lost track of time.

The toil and privation had worn him down and he was like iron. His garments hung in tatters; his boots were ripped. Long since his flour had been used up, and all his supplies except the salt. He lived on the meat of rabbits, but they were scarce, and the time came when there were none. Some days he did not eat. Hunger did not make him suffer. He killed a desert bird now and then, and once a wildcat crossing the valley. Eventually he felt his strength diminishing.

Many times he had been within rifle shot of Wildfire. And the grim, forbidding thought grew upon him that he must kill the stallion. The thought seemed involuntary, but his mind rejected it.

While Slone kept on his merciless pursuit, never letting Wildfire rest by day, time went on just as relentlessly. Spring gave way to early summer. The hot sun bleached the grass; water holes failed out in the valley, water could be found only in the canyons, and the dry winds began to blow the sand.

Wildfire worked away from this open valley, back to the south end, where the great monuments loomed, and still farther back, where they grew closer, till at length some of them were joined by weathered ridges to the walls of the surrounding plateau. Slone realized that in one way or another the pursuit was narrowing down to the end.

He found a water hole at the head of a wash in a split in the walls, and here he let Nagger rest and graze one whole day—the first day for a long time that he had not kept the red stallion in sight. That day was marked by the good fortune of killing a rabbit.

The next day Slone, facing the league-long shadows of the monuments, rode out again on his hopeless quest. For a change, Wildfire had climbed high up a slope of talus, through a narrow pass, rounded over with drifting sand. And Slone gazed down into a huge amphitheater full of monuments, like all that strange country.

A basin three miles across lay beneath him. The floor was white, and it seemed to move gently or radiate with heat waves. Studying it, Slone made out that the motion was caused by wind in long bleached grass. He had crossed small areas of this grass in different parts of the region.

Wildfire's tracks led down into this basin, and presently Slone, by straining his eyes, made out the red spot that was the stallion. *He's lookin' to quit the country*, he thought as he surveyed the scene.

With keen, slow gaze Slone studied the lay of wall and slope, and when he had circled the huge depression he made sure that Wildfire could not get out except by the narrow pass through which he had gone in. Slone sat astride Nagger in the mouth of this pass—a wash a few yards wide, walled by broken, rough rock on one side and an insurmountable slope on the other.

There was no water in that dry bowl. Slone reflected on the uselessness of keeping Wildfire down there, because Nagger could not go without water as long as Wildfire. The wind blew from the west, and it swooped up the slope, hot, with the odor of dry, dead grass.

But that hot wind stirred Slone with an idea, and suddenly he was tense,

excited, glowing, yet grim and hard. "Wildfire, I'll make you run with your namesake in that high grass," he called.

He saw that if he could fire the grass on the other side the wind of flame would drive Wildfire straight toward him. The slopes and walls narrowed up to the pass, but high grass grew to within a few rods of where Slone stood. But it seemed impossible to get behind Wildfire.

"At night—then—I could get round him," said Slone, thinking hard and narrowing his gaze to scan the circle of wall and slope. "Why not? No wind at night. That grass would burn slow till mornin'—till the wind came up—an' it's been west for days."

Suddenly Slone began to pound the patient Nagger and to cry out to him in wild exultance: "Old horse, we've got him! We've got him! We'll put a rope on him before this time tomorrow!"

Slone rode down into the bowl a mile, making absolutely certain that Wildfire could not climb out on that side. The far end, beyond the monuments, was a sheer wall of rock. Then he crossed to the left side. Here the sandy slope was almost too steep for even him to go up. And there was grass that would burn. He returned to the pass.

Then Slone reflected. He unsaddled Nagger and turned him loose, and with a snort he made down the gentle slope for the grass. Then Slone carried his saddle to a shady spot afforded by a slab of rock and dwarf cedar, and here he composed himself to rest and watch and think and wait.

Wildfire was plainly in sight no more than two miles away. Gradually he was grazing along toward the monuments and the far end of the great basin. Slone believed, because the place was so large, that Wildfire thought there was a way out on the other side or over the slopes or through the walls.

Slone lay in the shade, his head propped on his saddle, and while gazing down into the shimmering hollow he began to plan. The day passed slowly. That afternoon, toward the close, Slone ate the last of the meat. At sunset the wind died away and the air cooled. Nagger was not far away, but Wildfire had disappeared, probably behind one of the monuments.

When twilight fell Slone went down after Nagger and, returning with him, put on bridle and saddle. Farther back in the pass he found stunted dead cedars, and from these secured enough for his purpose. He kindled a fire and burned the ends of the sticks into red embers. Making a bundle of these, he put them under his arm, the dull, glowing ends backward, and then mounted his horse.

It was just about dark when he faced down into the valley. Keeping to the edge of the left slope, he put Nagger to a good trot. The crackling rustle of the grass was music to Slone's ears.

At last he reached the slow rise of jumbled rock that marked the extent of weathering on that side. Turning to the right, he rode out into the valley. Then, whipping one of the sticks into the wind until the end smoldered and showered sparks, he dropped it in the grass.

Instantly the grass blazed with a little stuttering roar. Nagger snorted. Without looking back, Slone rode across the valley, dropping a glowing stick every quarter of a mile. When he reached the other side a dozen fires

burned slowly behind him, white smoke rising lazily.

Then he loped Nagger along the side back to the sandy ascent, and on up to the mouth of the pass. There he searched for tracks. Wildfire had not gone out, and Slone experienced relief and exultation. He took up a position in the middle of the narrowest part of the pass, and there, with Nagger ready for anything, he once more composed himself to watch and wait.

Far across the darkness of the valley, low down, 12 lines of fire, widely separated, crept toward one another. They appeared thin and slow, with only an occasional leaping flame. Slone watched, strangely fascinated.

As he watched the lines perceptibly lengthened and brightened and pale shadows of smoke began to appear. Over at the left of the valley the two brightest fires, the first he had started, crept closer and closer together. They seemed long in covering distance. When the two lines met a sudden and larger blaze rose.

"Ah!" said the rider, and then he watched the other lines creeping together. Slone felt more and more relieved as the lines closed. The hours of the night dragged past until at length one long, continuous line of fire spread level across the valley, its bright, red line broken only where the monuments of stone were silhouetted against it.

The darkness of the valley changed. The light of the moon changed. The radiance of the stars changed. Either the line of fire was finding denser fuel to consume or it was growing appreciably closer, for the flames began to grow, to leap, and to flare.

A broad belt of valley grew bright in the light, and behind it loomed the

monuments, weird and dark, with columns of yellow and white smoke wreathing them.

Suddenly Slone's sensitive ear vibrated to a thrilling sound. He leaned down to place his ear to the sand. Rapid, rhythmic beat of hoofs made him leap to his feet, reaching for his lasso with right hand and a gun with his left.

Nagger lifted his head, sniffed the air, and snorted. Slone peered into the black belt of gloom that lay below him. He heard the beat of hoofs, swift, sharp, louder—louder. The night shadows were deceptive.

Once more Slone peered down into the void or what seemed a void. But it, too, had changed, lightened. The whole valley was brightening. Great palls of curling smoke rose white and yellow, to turn back as the monuments met their crests, and then to roll upward, blotting out the stars. It was such a light as he had never seen, except in dreams.

In the pale path before Slone, that fanlike slope of sand which opened down into the valley, appeared a swiftly moving black object, like a fleeting phantom. It was a phantom horse. Slone felt that his eyes, deceived by his mind, saw racing images. But what was that beating in his ears—sharp, swift, even, rhythmic? Never had his ears played him false. That running

object was a horse and he was coming like the wind. Slone felt something grip his heart.

The running horse halted just in the belt of light cast by the burning grass. There he stood sharply defined, clear as a cameo, not a hundred paces from Slone. It was Wildfire.

Slone uttered an involuntary cry. Thrill on thrill shot through him. How had he ever dared to believe he could capture that wild stallion? Slone looked and looked, filling his mind, regretting nothing, sure that the moment was reward for all he had endured.

The weird lights magnified Wildfire and showed him clearly. He seemed gigantic. He shone black against the fire. His head was high, his mane flying. Behind him the fire flared and the valley-wide column of smoke rolled majestically upward, and the great monuments seemed to retreat darkly and mysteriously as the flames advanced beyond them. It was a beautiful, unearthly spectacle, with its silence the strangest feature.

But suddenly Wildfire broke that silence with a whistle which to Slone's overstrained faculties seemed a blast as piercing as the splitting sound of lightning. And with the whistle Wildfire plunged up toward the pass.

Slone yelled at the top of his lungs and fired his gun before he could terrorize the stallion and drive him back down the slope. Soon Wildfire became again a running black object, and then he disappeared.

The great line of fire had gotten beyond the monuments and now stretched unbroken across the valley from wall to slope. Wildfire could never pierce that line of flames. And now Slone saw, in the paling sky to the east, that dawn was at hand.

Chapter Seven

Battle in the Smoke

LOOKING grimly glad, with the first red flash of sunrise, Slone felt a breeze fan his cheek. All that was needed now was a west wind. And here came the assurance of it as he gazed before him.

The valley appeared hazy and smoky, with slow, rolling clouds low down where the line of fire moved. The coming of daylight paled the blaze of the grass, though here and there Slone caught flickering glimpses of dull red flame. The wild stallion kept to the center of the valley, restlessly facing this way and that, but never toward the smoke. Slone made sure that Wildfire gradually gave ground as the line of smoke slowly worked toward him.

Every moment the breeze freshened, grew steadier and stronger, until Slone saw that it began to clear the valley of the low-hanging smoke. There came a time when once more the blazing line extended across from slope to slope.

Wildfire was cornered, trapped. Many times Slone nervously uncoiled and recoiled his lasso. Presently the great chance of his life would come—the hardest and most important throw he would ever have with a rope. He did not miss often, but he missed sometimes—and here he must be swift and sure.

It annoyed him that his hands perspired and trembled and that something weighty seemed to obstruct his breathing. He was pretty much worn out, not in the best of condition for a

hard fight with a wild horse. Slone was prepared for hours of strained watching, and then a desperate effort, and then a shock that might kill Wildfire and cripple Nagger, or a long race and fight.

But he soon discovered that he was wrong about the long watch and wait. The wind had grown strong and was driving the fire swiftly. The flames, fanned by the breeze, leaped to a formidable barrier. In less than an hour Wildfire had been driven down toward the narrowing neck of the valley, and he had begun to run, to and fro, back and forth.

Wildfire showed evidence of terror, but he did not attempt to make the pass. Instead he went at the right-hand slope of the valley and began to climb. The slope was steep and soft, yet the stallion climbed up and up. The dust flew in clouds; the gravel rolled down, and the sand followed in long streams.

"Go ahead, you red devil!" yelled Slone. He was much elated. In that soft bank Wildfire would tire out while not hurting himself.

Slone watched the stallion in admiration and pity and exultation. Wildfire did not make much headway, for he slipped back almost as much as he gained. He attempted one place after another. The slope above was endless and grew steeper, more difficult toward the top. Slone knew absolutely that no horse could climb over it. He grew apprehensive, however, for Wildfire might stick up there on the slope until the line of fire passed.

Long sheets of sand and gravel slid down to spill thinly over the low bank. Wildfire, now sinking to his knees, worked steadily upward till he had reached a point halfway up the slope, at the head of a long, yellow bank of treacherous-looking sand. Here he was halted by a low bulge, which he might have surmounted had his feet been free. But he stood deep in the sand. For the first time he looked down at the sweeping fire, and then at Slone.

Suddenly the bank of sand began to slide with him. He snorted in fright. The avalanche started slowly and was evidently no mere surface slide. It was deep. It stopped—then started again—and again stopped. Wildfire appeared to be sinking deeper and deeper. His struggling only embedded him more firmly. Then the bank of sand, with an ominous roar, began to move once more. This time it slipped swiftly.

Just as suddenly the avalanche stopped again. Slone saw, from the great oval hole it had left before, that it was indeed deep. That was the reason it did not slide readily. When the dust cleared away Slone saw the stallion, sunk to his flanks in the sand, utterly helpless.

With a wild whoop Slone leaped off Nagger, and, a lasso in each hand, ran down the long bank. The fire was perhaps a quarter of a mile distant, and, since the grass was thinning out, it was not coming so fast as it had been. The position of the stallion was halfway between the fire and Slone, and a hundred yards up the slope.

Like a madman Slone climbed up through the dragging, loose sand. He was beside himself with a fury of excitement. In his eagerness he slipped, and fell, and crawled, and leaped, until he reached the slide which held Wildfire prisoner.

The stallion might have been fast in quicksand up to his body for all the movement he could make. He could move only his head. He held that up,

his eyes wild, showing the whites, his foaming mouth wide open, his teeth gleaming.

As Slone leaped within roping distance the avalanche slipped a foot or two—halted—slipped once more, and slowly started again with that low roar. He leaped closer, whirling his rope. The loop hissed round his head and whistled as he flung it. And when fiercely he jerked back on the rope, the noose closed tight round Wildfire's neck.

"By—God—I—got—a rope—on him!" cried Slone in hoarse pants.

Wildfire's head seemed a demon-head of hate. It reached out, mouth agape, to bite, to rend.

Then came the moment of triumph for Slone. No moment could ever equal that one, when he realized he stood there with a rope around that grand stallion's neck. All the days and the miles and the toil and the endurance and the hopelessness and the hunger were paid for in that moment. His heart seemed too large for his breast.

"I tracked—you!" he cried savagely. "I stayed—with you! An' I got a rope—on you! An'—I'll ride you—you red devil!"

He hauled on the lasso, pulling the stallion's head down and down. The action was the lust of capture as well as the rider's instinctive motive to make the horse fear him.

The avalanche slipped with little jerks, as if treacherously loosing its hold for a long plunge. The line of fire below ate at the bleached grass and the long column of smoke curled away on the wind.

Slone held the taut lasso with his left hand, and with the right he swung the other rope, catching the noose round Wildfire's nose. Then letting go of the first rope he hauled on the other, pulling the head of the stallion far down. Hand over hand Slone closed in on the horse. He leaped on Wildfire's head, pressed it down, and, holding it down on the sand with his knees, with swift fingers he tied the noose in a hackamore. Then, just as swiftly, he bound his scarf tight round Wildfire's head, blindfolding him.

"All so easy!" exclaimed Slone under his breath. "Lord! who would believe it! Is it a dream?" He rose and let the stallion have a free head.

The avalanche had begun to slide, to heave and bulge and crack. Dust rose in clouds from all around. The sand appeared to open and let him sink to his knees. The rattle of gravel was drowned in a soft roar.

Then he shot down swiftly, holding the lassos, keeping himself erect, and riding as if in a boat. He felt the successive steps of the slope, and then the long incline below, and then the checking and rising and spreading of the avalanche as it slowed down on the level. All movement then was checked violently. He appeared to be half buried in sand. While he struggled to extricate himself the thick dust blew away and settled so that he could see.

Wildfire lay before him, at the edge of the slide, and now he was not so deeply embedded as he had been up on the slope. He was struggling and probably soon would have been able to get out. The line of fire was close now, but Slone did not fear that.

At his shrill whistle Nagger bounded toward him, obedient, but snorting, with ears laid back. He halted. A second whistle started him again. Slone finally dug himself out of the sand, pulled the lassos out, and ran the length of them toward Nagger.

"Come on!" called Slone harshly. He got a hand on the horse, pulled him round, and, mounting in a flash, wound both lassos round the pommel of the saddle.

"Haul him out, Nagger, old boy!" cried Slone, and he dug spurs into the black.

One plunge of Nagger's slid the stallion out of the sand. Snorting, wild, blinded, Wildfire got up, shaking in every limb. He plunged, rearing at the end of the plunge, and struck out viciously with his hoofs.

Slone, quick with spur and bridle, swerved Nagger aside and Wildfire, off his balance, went down with a crash. Slone dragged him, stretched him out, pulled him over twice before he got forefeet planted. Once up, he reared again, screeching his rage, striking wildly with his hoofs. Slone wheeled aside and toppled him over again.

Again he dragged the stallion. He was ruthless. He would have to be so, stopping just short of maiming or killing the horse, else he would never break him. But Wildfire was nimble. He got to his feet and this time he lunged out. Nagger, powerful as he was, could not sustain the tremendous shock, and went down. Slone saved himself with a rider's supple skill, falling clear of the horse, and he leaped again into the saddle as Nagger pounded up. Nagger braced his huge frame and held the plunging stallion. But the saddle slipped a little; the cinches cracked. Slone eased the strain by wheeling after Wildfire.

The horses had worked away from the fire, and Wildfire, free of the stifling smoke, began to break and lunge and pitch, plunging round Nagger in a circle, running blindly. Slone avoided the rushes, making a pivot of Nagger, round which the wild horse dashed in his frenzy.

"Steady, Nagger, old boy!" Slone kept calling. "He'll never get at you—if he slips that blinder I'll kill him!"

The stallion was a fiend in his fury, quicker than a panther, wonderful on his feet, and powerful as an ox. But he was at a disadvantage. He could not see. The soft sand in the pass was plowed deep before Wildfire paused in his mad plunges. He was wet and heaving.

Slone uncoiled the lassos from the pommel and slacked them a little. Wildfire stood up, striking at the air, snorting fiercely. Slone tried to wheel Nagger in close behind the stallion. Both narrowly escaped the vicious hoofs. Slone took a desperate chance and spurred Nagger in a single leap as Wildfire reared again. The horses collided. Slone hauled the lassos tight. The impact threw Wildfire off his balance, just as Slone had calculated, and as the stallion plunged down on four feet Slone spurred Nagger close against him.

Wildfire was a little in the lead. He could only half-rear now, for Nagger, always against him, jostled him down, and Slone's iron arm hauled on the short ropes. When Wildfire turned to bite, Slone knocked the vicious nose back with a long swing of his fist.

Up the pass the horses plunged. Slone saw the long green-and-gray valley, and the isolated monuments in the distance.

"Run, you red devil!" Slone called. "Drag us around now till you're done!"

They left the pass and swept out upon the waste of sage. Slone realized, from the stinging of the sweet wind in his face, that Nagger was being pulled along at a tremendous pace. The

faithful black could never have made the wind cut so. Lower the wild stallion stretched and swifter he ran, till it seemed to Slone that death must end that thunderbolt race.

Chapter Eight

Two Horses and a Man

LUCY BOSTIL had called twice to her father and he had not answered. He was out at the hitching-rail with Holley, the rider, and two other men. If he heard Lucy he gave no sign of it. She had on her chaps and did not care to go any farther than the door where she stood.

"Somers has gone to Durango an' Shugrue is out huntin' hosses," Lucy heard Bostil say gruffly.

"Wal now, I reckon I could handle the boat an' fetch Creech's hosses over," said Holley.

Then one of the other two men spoke up. Lucy had seen him before, but did not know his name.

"Sure there ain't any need to rustle the job. The river hain't showed any signs of risin' yet. But Creech is worryin'. The grass is gone over there. Creech is grainin' his stock these last few days. An' thet's expensive."

"How about the flat up the canyon?" queried Bostil. "Ain't there any grass there?"

"Reckon not. It's the dryest spell Creech ever had," replied the other.

"Bostil, them hosses, the racers special, ought to be brought acrost the river," said Holley earnestly.

"The boat's got to be patched up," replied Bostil shortly.

There was an awkward pause. Creech's rider, whoever he was, evidently tried to conceal his anxiety.

"Wal, when will you have the hosses fetched over?" he asked deliberately. "Creech'll want to know."

"Just as soon as the boat's mended," replied Bostil. "I'll put Shugrue on the job tomorrow."

"Thanks, Bostil. Sure, thet'll be all right. Creech'll be satisfied," said the rider as if relieved. Then he mounted, and with his companion trotted down the lane.

"Bostil, the dry winter an' spring here ain't any guarantee thet there wasn't a lot of snow up in the mountains," said Holley.

Holley's remark startled Bostil. "No—it ain't—sure," he replied.

"An' any mornin' along now we might wake up to hear the Colorado boomin'," went on Holley significantly.

"It ain't my business thet Creech lives over there riskin' his stock every spring," replied Bostil darkly.

Holley opened his lips to speak, hesitated, looked away from Bostil, and finally said, "No, it sure ain't." Then he turned and walked away, head bent in sober thought.

Bostil came toward the open door where Lucy stood. He looked somber. At her greeting he seemed startled. "What?" he said.

"I just said, 'Hello, Dad,'" she replied demurely.

"Hello yourself. Did you know Van got throwed an' hurt?"

"Yes."

Bostil swore under his breath. "There ain't any riders on the range thet can be trusted," he said disgustedly. "Think of thet fool Van gettin' throwed by a two-dollar Ute mustang. An' hurt so he can't ride for days! With them races comin' soon! It

makes me sick."

"Van will be all right in a few days."

"No matter. It's bad business. If I had any other rider who could handle the King I'd let Van go."

"I can get just as much out of the King as Van can," said Lucy spiritedly.

"You never had any use for Sage King," said Bostil.

"I love the King a little, and hate him a lot," laughed Lucy.

"Wal, I might let you ride at thet, if Van ain't in shape," rejoined her father.

"I wouldn't ride him in the race. But I'll keep him in fine fettle."

Bostil grunted. "See here. I don't want any weight up on the King. You take him out for a few days. An' ride him! Savvy thet?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Give him miles an' miles—an' then comin' home, on good trails, ride him for all you're worth. Now, Lucy, keep your eye open. Don't let anyone get near you on the sage."

"I won't. Dad, do you still worry about poor Joel Creech?"

"Not Joel. But I'd rather lose all my stock then have Cordts or Dick Sears get within a mile of you. Cordts has sworn thet if he can't steal the King he'll get you."

"Oh! he prefers the horse to me."

"Wal, Lucy, I've a sneakin' idea thet Cordts will never leave the uplands unless he gets you an' the King both."

"And, Dad—you consented to let that horse thief come to our races?" exclaimed Lucy with heat.

"Why not? Cordts gave his word not to turn a trick till after the races."

As Lucy went down toward the corrals she was thinking deeply. She could always tell, womanlike, when her father was excited or agitated. She loved her father, but there was a side to him she feared. And somehow related to that side was his hardness toward Creech and his intolerance of any rider owning a fast horse and his obsession in regard to his own racers.

Sight of the corrals, however, and of the King prancing around, drove serious thoughts away. There were riders there, among them Farlane, and they all had pleasant greetings for her.

"Farlane, Dad says I'm to take out Sage King," announced Lucy.

"Wal, now, I'm doggoned!" added Farlane, looking worried and pleased at once. "I reckon, Miss Lucy, you—you wouldn't fool me?"

"Why, Farlane!" returned Lucy reproachfully.

All the riders laughed, and Lucy joined them.

They brought out the gray, and after the manner of riders who had the care of a great horse and loved him, they curried and combed him before saddling him.

"Reckon you'd better ride Van's saddle," suggested Farlane. "Them races is close now, an' a strange saddle—"

"Of course. Don't change anything he's used to, except the stirrups," replied Lucy.

Despite her antipathy toward Sage King, Lucy could not gaze at him without all a rider's glory in a horse. He was sleek, so graceful, so racy, so near the soft gray of the sage, so beautiful in build and action. He did not like Lucy very well, a fact that perhaps accounted for Lucy's antipathy. For that matter, he did not like any woman.

"Thar, I reckon them stirrups is right," declared Farlane. "Now, Miss Lucy, hold him tight till he wears off thet edge. He needs work."

Sage King would not kneel for Lucy

as Sarchedon did, and he was too high for her to mount from the ground, so she mounted from a rock. She took to the road, and then the first trail into the sage, intending to trot him 10 or 15 miles down into the valley, and give him some fast, warm work on the return.

The day was early in May and promised to grow hot. There was not a cloud in the blue sky. The wind, laden with the breath of sage, blew briskly from the west. All before Lucy lay the vast valley, gray and dusky-gray, then blue, then purple where the monuments stood, and, farther still, dark ramparts of rock.

In an hour Lucy was many miles from home, and farther down in the valley than she had ever been. In fact, she had never before been down the long slope to the valley floor. How changed the horizon became! The monuments loomed up now, dark, sentinel-like, and strange. The first one, a great red rock, seemed to her some five miles away. It was lofty, straight-sided, with a green slope at its base. Beyond that the other monuments stretched out down the valley. Lucy decided to ride as far as the first one before turning back.

Presently over to the left, where the monuments were thicker, and gradually merged their slopes and lines and bulk into the yellow walls, she saw drifting clouds of smoke.

"Well, what's that, I wonder?" she mused. To see smoke on the horizon in that direction was unusual, though out toward Durango the grassy benches would often burn over.

So she kept on, now and then gazing at the smoke. As she came nearer to the first monument she was surprised, then amazed, at its height and surpassing size. It was mountain-high—a grand tower—smooth, worn, glistening, yellow and red. The trail she had followed petered out in a deep wash, and beyond that she crossed no more trails. The air was hot down here; the breeze was heavy and smelled of fire, and the sand was blowing here and there.

She had a sense of the bigness, the openness of this valley, and then she realized its wildness and strangeness. These lonely, isolated monuments made the place different from any she had visited.

Suddenly Sage King halted sharply, shot up his ears, and whistled. Lucy was startled. That from the King meant something. Hastily, with keen glance, she swept the foreground. A mile on, near the monument, was a small black spot. It seemed motionless. But the King's whistle had proved it to be a horse.

When Lucy had covered a quarter of the intervening distance she could distinguish the horse and that there appeared something strange about his position. Lucy urged Sage King into a lope and soon drew nearer. The black horse had his head down, yet he did not appear to be grazing. He was as still as a statue. He stood just outside a clump of greasewood and cactus.

Suddenly a sound pierced the stillness. The King jumped and snorted in fright. For an instant Lucy's blood ran cold, for it was a horrible cry. Then she recognized it as the neigh of a horse in agony. The black horse had not moved, so the sound could not have come from him. Lucy reined in on top of a little knoll, perhaps 100 yards from where the black horse stood, and bent her keen gaze forward.

It was a huge, gaunt, shaggy black horse she saw, with the saddle farther

up on his shoulders than it should have been. He stood motionless, as if utterly exhausted. His forelegs were braced, so that he leaned slightly back. Then Lucy saw a rope. It was fast to the saddle and stretched down into the cactus. There was no other horse in sight, nor any living thing.

She hesitated. She knew there was another horse, very likely at the other end of that lasso. Probably a rider had been thrown, perhaps killed. Certainly a horse had been hurt. Then on the moment rang out the same neigh of agony, only weaker and shorter. Lucy spurred the King on.

There was a little slope to descend, a wash to cross, a bench to climb—and then she rode up to the black horse. Sage King needed harder treatment than Lucy had ever given him. When she got him quiet she looked around.

The black horse was indeed huge. His mane, his shaggy flanks, were lathered as if he had been smeared with heavy soapsuds. He raised his head to look at her. Lucy, accustomed to horses all her life, saw that this one welcomed her arrival. But he was almost ready to drop.

Two taut lassos stretched from the pommel of his saddle down a little into a depression full of brush and cactus and rocks. Then Lucy saw a red horse. He was down in a bad position. She heard his low, choking heaves. Probably he had broken legs or back. Sage King refused to go nearer, and Lucy dismounted.

The red horse was partly hidden by overbending brush. He had plunged into a hole full of cactus. There was a hackamore round his nose and a tight noose round his neck. The one round his neck was also round his forelegs. And both lassos were held taut by the black horse. A torn and soiled rider's scarf hung limp round the red horse's nose, kept from falling off by the hackamore.

Lucy gazed around, ran to and fro, glanced down the little slope and beyond, but she did not see anything resembling the form of a man. Then she ran back.

Lucy took another quick look at the red stallion. She did not believe either his legs or back were hurt. He was just played out and tangled and tied in the ropes, and could not get up. The shaggy black horse stood there braced and indomitable. But he, likewise, was almost ready to drop.

Lucy went closer to the stallion so that she could almost touch him. He saw her. He was nearly choked. Foam and blood wheezed out with his heaves. She must do something quickly. In her haste she pricked her arms and shoulders on the cactus.

She led the black horse closer in, letting the ropes go slack. Then she edged down in among the cactus and brush. The red horse no longer lay in a strained position. He could lift his head. Lucy saw that the noose still held tight round his neck. Fearlessly she jerked it loose. Then she backed away, but not quite out of his reach. He coughed and breathed slowly. Then he snorted.

"You're all right now," said Lucy soothingly. Slowly she reached a hand toward his head. He drew it back as far as he could. She stepped around, closer, and more in back of him, and put a hand on him gently. Then she slipped out of the brush and, untying one lasso from the pommel, she returned to the horse and pulled it from round his legs. He was free now, except the hackamore, and that rope was

slack. Lucy stood near him, watching him, talking to him, waiting for him to get up.

At first he made no efforts to rise. He watched Lucy, less fearfully, she imagined. And she never made a move. She wanted him to understand that she had not hurt him and would not hurt him.

Finally, with a long, slow heave he got to his feet. Lucy led him out of the hole to open ground. She stood thrilled and amazed.

"Oh, what a wild, beautiful horse! What a giant! He's bigger than the King. Oh, if Dad could see him!"

The red stallion did not appear to be hurt. The twitching of his muscles must have been caused by the cactus spikes embedded in him. There were drops of blood all over one side. Lucy thought she dared to try to pull these thorns out.

She walked up to him naturally and spoke softly, and reached a hand for his shoulder. "Whoa, Reddy. Whoa now— There, that's a good fellow. Why, I wouldn't rope you or hit you. I'm only a girl."

He drew up, made a single effort to jump, which she prevented, and then he stood quivering, eying her, while she talked soothingly, and patted him. Presently she gently pulled out one of the cactus spikes. The horse flinched, but he stood. The cactus needles were loose and easily removed or brushed off. At length she got him free of them, and was almost as proud as she was glad. The horse had gradually dropped his head; he was tired and his spirit was broken.

She slipped the noose from the stallion's head, leaving the hackamore, and, coiling the loose lasso, she hung it over the pommel of the black's saddle. Then she took up his bridle. "Come on," she called.

The black followed her, and the stallion, still fast to him by the lasso Lucy had left tied, trooped behind with bowed head. Lucy was elated. But Sage King did not like the matter at all. Lucy had to drop the black's bridle and catch the King, and then ride back to lead the other again.

A broad trail marked the way the two horses had come, and it led off to the left, toward where the monuments were thickest, and where the great sections of wall stood, broken and battlemented. Lucy was hard put to it to hold Sage King, but the horses behind plodded along.

Intent on the trail, Lucy failed to note time or distance till the looming and frowning monuments stood aloft before her. She passed the first one, a huge square butte, and then the second, a ragged, thin, double shaft, and then went between two much alike, reaching skyward in the shape of monstrous mittens.

All at once Sage King shied, and Lucy looked down to see a man lying on the ground. He lay inert. But his eyes were open—dark, staring eyes. They moved, and he called. But Lucy could not understand him.

In a flash she leaped off the King. She ran to the prostrate man—dropped to her knees. "Oh!" she cried. His face was ghastly. "Oh! are you—you badly hurt?"

"Lift me—my head," he said faintly.

She raised his head.

"Boy, they're mine—the black an' the red!" he cried.

"They surely must be," replied Lucy. "Oh! tell me. Are you hurt?"

"Boy! did you catch them—fetch them back—lookin' for me?"

"I sure did."

"You caught–that red devil–an' fetched him–back to me?" went on the wondering, faint voice. "Boy–oh–boy!"

He lifted a long, ragged arm and pulled Lucy down. She was powerless. She felt her face against his–and her breast against his. The pounding of his heart was like blows. The first instant she wanted to laugh, despite her pity. Then the powerful arm–the contact affected her as nothing ever before.

She struggled so violently that she freed herself. "See here–that's no way to act–to hug–a person," she cried with flaming cheeks.

"Boy, I–"

"I'm *not* a boy. I'm a girl."

"What!"

Lucy tore off her sombrero, which had been pulled far forward, and this revealed her face fully, and her hair came tumbling down. The rider gazed, stupefied. Then a faint tinge of red colored his ghastly cheeks.

"A girl! Why–why, 'scuse me, Miss. I–I took you–for a boy."

"Sure I'm a girl. But that's no matter– You've been thrown. Are you hurt?

He smiled a weak assent.

"Badly?" she queried.

"I'm afraid so. I can't move."

"Oh! What shall I do?"

"Can you–get me water?" he whispered.

Lucy flew to her horse to get the small canteen she always carried. But that had been left on her saddle, and she had ridden Van's. Then she gazed around. The wash she had crossed several times ran near where the rider lay. Green grass and willows bordered it. She ran down and, filling her sombrero, she hurried back to the side of the rider. It was difficult to give him a drink.

"Thanks, Miss," he said gratefully.

"Have you any broken bones?" asked Lucy.

"I don't know. I can't feel much."

"Are you in pain?"

"Hardly. I feel sort of thick."

"Let me feel if you have any broken bones– *That* arm isn't broken, I'm positive."

The rider smiled faintly again. How he stared with his strained, dark eyes! His face showed ghastly through the thin, soft beard and the tan. Lucy found his right arm badly bruised, but not broken. She made sure his collar bones and shoulder blades were intact. Broken ribs were harder to locate; still, as he did not feel pain from pressure, she concluded there were no fractures there. With her assistance he moved his legs, proving no broken bones there.

"I'm afraid it's my–spine," he said.

"But you raised your head once," she replied. "If your back was–was broken or injured you couldn't raise your head."

"So I couldn't. I guess I'm just knocked out. I was–pretty weak before Wildfire knocked me–off Nagger."

"Wildfire?"

"That's the red stallion's name.

"I – trailed him – days – weeks – months. We crossed the great canyon–"

"The Grand Canyon?"

"It must be that."

"The Grand Canyon is down there," said Lucy, pointing. "I live on it. You've come a long way."

"Hundreds of miles! But I stayed with Wildfire. An' I put a rope on him. An' he got away. An' it was a boy–no–a *girl* who–saved him for me–an'

maybe saved my life, too!"

"Never mind me. You say you were weak? Have you been ill?"

"No, miss. Just starved–I starved on Wildfire's trail."

Lucy ran to her saddle and got the biscuits out of the pockets of her coat. "Here. I never thought. Oh, you've had a hard time of it! I understand. That wonderful flame of a horse! I'd have stayed, too. My father was a rider once. Bostil. Did you ever hear of him?"

"Bostil. The name–I've heard." Then the rider lay thinking, as he munched a biscuit. "Yes, I remember, but it was long ago. Bostil had a boat at the Crossing of the Fathers."

"Yes, they called the ferry that."

"I remember well now. They said Bostil couldn't count his horses–that he was a rich man, hard on riders–an' he'd used a gun more than once."

Lucy bowed her head. "Yes, that's my dad."

The rider did not seem to see how he had hurt her.

"Here we are talking–wasting time," she said. "I must start home. You can't be moved. What shall I do?"

"That's for you to say, Bostil's daughter."

"My name's Lucy," replied the girl, blushing painfully. "I mean I'll be glad to do anything you think best."

"You're very good."

Then he turned his face away. Lucy looked closely at him. His clothes and his boots hung in tatters. He had no hat, no coat, no vest. His gaunt face bore traces of what might have been a fine, strong comeliness, but now it was only thin, worn, wan, pitiful.

"Then I'll do what I think best for you," said Lucy. First she unsaddled the black Nagger. With the saddle she made a pillow for the rider's head, and she covered him with the saddle blanket.

"I'll water the horses–then tie Wildfire here on a double rope. There's grass."

"But you can't lead him," replied the rider.

"He'll follow me."

"That red devil!" The rider shuddered as he spoke.

Lucy had some faint inkling of what a terrible fight that had been between man and horse. "Yes, when I found him he was broken. Look at him now."

But the rider did not appear to want to see the stallion. He gazed up at Lucy, and she saw something in his eyes that made her think of a child. She left him, had no trouble in watering the horses, and haltered Wildfire among the willows on a patch of grass. Then she returned.

"I'll go now," she said to the rider.

"Where?"

"Home. I'll come back tomorrow, early, and bring someone to help you–"

"Girl, if *you* want to help me more–bring me some bread an' meat. Don't tell anyone. Look what a ragamuffin I am. An' there's Wildfire. I don't want him seen till I'm–on my feet again. I know riders–that's all. If you want to be so good–come."

"I'll come," replied Lucy simply.

"Thank you. I owe you–a lot. Are you sure you tied Wildfire good an' tight?"

"Yes, I'm sure. I'll go now. I hope you'll be better tomorrow."

Lucy hesitated, with her hand on the King's bridle. She did not like to leave this young man lying there helpless on the desert. She was so strangely preoccupied that she forgot it was necessary for her to have a step to mount

Sage King. She realized it quickly enough when she attempted it. Then she led him off in the sage till she found a rock.

Mounting, she turned him straight across country, meaning to cut out miles of travel that would have been necessary along her back trail. Once she looked back. The rider was not visible; the black horse, Nagger, was out of sight, but Wildfire, blazing in the sun, watched her depart.

Chapter Nine

A Grand Race in the Making

SOON she had left the monument region and was down on the valley floor again. From time to time she conquered a desire to look back. Presently she was surprised and very glad to ride into a trail where she saw the tracks she had made coming out. With much relief she turned Sage King into this trail, and then any anxiety she had felt left her entirely.

She eased the King into a long, swinging lope. It was hard to hold him in, once he got out of a trot, and after miles and miles of this, when she thought best to slow down he nearly pulled her arms off. Still she finally got him in hand. Then followed miles of soft and rough going, which seemed long and tedious. Beyond that was the home stretch up the valley, whose gradual slope could be seen only at a distance. Here was a straight, broad trail, not too soft or too hard.

Lucy reached down to assure herself that the cinch was tight, then she pulled her sombrero down hard, slackened the bridle, and let the King go. He simply broke his gait, he was so surprised. Like the wary horse he was he took to a canter, to try out what his new freedom meant.

"Say, what's the matter with you?" called Lucy disdainfully. "Are you lazy? Or don't you believe I can ride you?"

Whereupon she dug him with her spurs. Sage King snorted. His action shifted marvelously. Thunder rolled from under his hoofs. And he broke out of that clattering roar into his fleet stride, where his hoofbeats were swift, regular, rhythmic.

Lucy rode him with teeth and fists clenched, bending low. He went so fast that the wind blinded her. The trail was only a white streak in blurred gray.

Then she felt the lessening of the tremendous pace. Sage King had run himself out and the miles were behind her. Gradually her sight became clear, and as the hot and wet horse slowed down, satisfied with his wild run, Lucy realized that she was up on the slope only a few miles from home.

Suddenly she thought she saw something dark stir behind a sagebush just ahead. Before she could move a hand at the bridle Sage King leaped with a frantic snort. It was a swerving, nimble, tremendous bound. He went high. Lucy was unseated, but somehow clung on, and came down with him, finding the saddle. And it seemed, while in the air, she saw a long, snaky, whipping loop of rope shoot out and close just where Sage King's legs had been.

She screamed. The horse broke and ran. Lucy, righting herself, looked back to see Joel Creech holding a limp lasso. He had tried to rope the King. Lucy never in her life had been so

furious as she was at this moment.

Joel shook his fist at her and yelled, "I'd 'a' got you—on any other hoss!"

She did not reply, though she had to fight herself to keep from pulling her gun and shooting at him. She guided the running horse back into the trail, rapidly leaving Creech out of sight.

She ran the King clear up to the corrals, and he was still going hard when she turned down the lane to the barns. Then she pulled him in.

Farlane was there to meet her. She saw no other riders and was glad.

"Wal, Miss Lucy, the King sure looks good," said Farlane as she jumped off and flung him the bridle. "He's just had about right, judgin'— Say, girl, you're all pale! Oh, say, you wasn't scared of the King, now?"

"Joel Creech waylaid me out in the sage—and—and tried to catch me." Lucy checked herself. It might not do to tell how Joel had tried to catch her.

"He did? An' you on the King!" Farlane laughed, as if relieved. "Wal, he's tried thet before, Miss Lucy. But when you was up on the gray—thet shows Joel's crazy, sure."

"He sure is. Farlane, I—I am mad!"

"Wal, cool off, Miss Lucy. It ain't nothin' to git set up about. An' don't tell the old man."

"Why not?" demanded Lucy.

"Wal, because he's in a queer sort of bad mood lately. It wouldn't be safe. He hates them Creeches. So don't tell him."

"All right, Farlane, I won't. Don't you tell, either," replied Lucy soberly.

"Sure I'll keep mum. But if Joel doesn't watch out I'll put a crimp in him myself."

Lucy hurried away down the lane and entered the house without meeting anyone. In her room she changed

her clothes and lay down to rest and think.

Later she left her room to make up a pack of supplies for the rider. Her aunt was busy in the kitchen, and Bostil had not come in. Somehow the task pleased her. She recalled the lean face of the rider, and that recalled his ragged appearance. Why not pack up an outfit of clothes? Bostil had a stock room full of such accessories for his men. She hurried to the stock room, and with deft hands and swift judgment selected an outfit for the rider, even down to a comb and razor. All this she carried quickly to her room, where she added a bit of glass from a broken mirror, and soap and a towel. Then she tied up a second pack.

Bostil did not come home to supper, a circumstance that made Lucy's aunt cross. They ate alone, and waiting awhile, were rather late in clearing away the table. After this Lucy had her chance in the dusk of early evening, and she carried both packs way out into the sage and left them near the trail.

She hurried back to the house and reached the sitting-room unobserved. The lamps had been lighted and a log blazed on the hearth. She was reading when Bostil entered.

"Hello, Lucy!" he said.

He looked tired, and Lucy knew he had been drinking, because when he had been he never offered to kiss her. The strange, somber shade was still on his face, but it brightened somewhat at sight of her. Lucy greeted him as always.

"Farlane tells me you handled the King great—better'n Van has worked him lately," said Bostil. "Lucy, you take the King out every day for a while. Ride him now an' watch out! Joel Creech was in the village today. He sure sneaked when he seen me. He's up to some mischief."

Lucy did not know what to say. Presently Bostil bade her good night. Lucy endeavored to read, but her mind continually wandered back to the adventure of the day.

Next morning she had difficulty in concealing her impatience, but luck favored her. Bostil was not in evidence, and Farlane, for once, could spare no more time than it took to saddle Sage King. Lucy rode out into the sage, pretty sure that no one watched her.

She had hidden the packs near the tallest bunch of greasewood along the trail; and when she halted behind it she had no fear of being seen from the corrals. She got the packs. The light one was not hard to tie back of the saddle, but the large one was a very different matter. She decided to carry it in front. There was a good-sized rock near, upon which she stepped, leading Sage King alongside, and after a trying moment she got up, holding the pack.

Then she started off, holding the pack across her lap. The trouble was that Sage King had no slow gait; even his walk was fast. And Lucy was compelled to hold him into that. She wanted to hurry, but that seemed out of the question.

The pack was hard to hold, and Sage King fretted at the monotonous walk. The hours dragged. The sun grew hot. It was noon, almost, when she reached the point where she cut off the trail to the left. Thereafter, with the monuments standing ever higher, and the distance perceptibly lessening, the minutes passed less tediously.

At length she reached the zone of lofty rocks. She rode down among them, and was glad when she saw the stone mittens—her landmarks. At last she spied the green-bordered wash and the few cedar trees. Then a horse blazed red against the sage and another shone black.

Before she got quite close to the cedars she saw a man. He took a few slow steps out of the shade. His back was bent. Lucy recognized the rider, and in her gladness to see him on his feet she cried out. Then, when Sage King reached the spot, Lucy rolled the pack off to the ground.

"Oh, that was a job!" she cried.

The rider looked up with eyes that seemed keener, less staring than she remembered. "You came? I was afraid you wouldn't," he said.

"Sure I came. You're better—not badly hurt?" she said gravely. "I—I'm so glad."

"I've got a crimp in my back, that's all."

Lucy was quick to see that after the first glance at her he was all eyes for Sage King. She laughed. Slipping off, she threw the bridle, and then, swiftly untying the second pack, she laid it down.

The rider, with slow, painful steps and bent back, approached Sage King and put a lean, strong, brown hand on him, and touched him as if he wished to feel if he were real. Then he whistled softly. When he turned to Lucy his eyes shone with a beautiful light.

"It's Sage King, Bostil's favorite," said Lucy.

"Sage King! He looks it—but never a wild horse?"

"No."

"A fine horse," replied the rider. "Of course he can run?"

Lucy laughed. "Run! The King is Bostil's favorite. He can run away from any horse in the uplands."

"I'll bet you Wildfire can beat him."

"Come on!" cried Lucy daringly.

Then the rider and girl looked more earnestly at each other. He smiled in a way that changed his face—brightened out the set hardness.

"I reckon I'll have to crawl," he said ruefully. "But maybe I can ride in a few days—if you'll come back again."

His remark brought to Lucy the idea that of course she would hardly see this rider again after today. She felt an unfamiliar confusion.

"I—I've brought you—some things," she said, pointing to the larger pack.

"Grub was all I asked you for, Miss," he said, somewhat stiffly.

"Oh, yes, but I—I thought—" Lucy became unaccountably embarrassed. "Your clothes were—so torn. And no wonder you were thrown—in those boots! So I thought I'd—oh, you won't refuse to take them! Please don't!"

A warmth came into his face. "Take them? I should smile I will."

He tried to reach down to lift the pack, but as it was obviously painful for him to bend, Lucy intercepted him.

"But you've had no breakfast," she protested. "Why not eat before you open that pack?"

"Nope. I'm not hungry. Maybe I'll eat a little, after I dress up." He walked away with slow, stiff steps and disappeared behind the willows in the little hollow.

Lucy uncoiled the rope on her saddle and haltered Sage King on the best grass near at hand. Then she opened the pack of supplies, thinking the while that she must not tarry here long.

The pack contained dried fruits and meat and staples, also an assortment of good things to eat that were of a perishable nature, already much the worse for the long ride. She spread all this out in the shade of a cedar. The utensils were few—two cups, two pans, and a tiny pot. She gathered wood, and arranged it for a fire.

Finally she thought of the red stallion, and started off down the wash to take a look at him. He was grazing. He had lost some of the dirt and dust and the bedraggled appearance. When he caught sight of her he lifted his head and whistled.

Lucy went on closer to Wildfire, fascinated now. "If he doesn't know me!" she cried.

Lucy went directly to him and got a hand on him. Wildfire reared a little and shook a little, but this disappeared presently under her touch. He held his head very high and watched her with wonderful eyes. Gradually she drew his head down. Standing before him, she carefully and slowly changed the set of the hackamore, which had made a welt on his nose.

It seemed to have been her good fortune that every significant move she had made around this stallion had been to mitigate his pain. Lucy knew she was safe when she untied the lasso from the strong root where she had fastened it, and led the stallion down the wash to a pool of water. And she stood beside him with a hand on his shoulder while he bent his head to drink. Lucy led him up the wash to another likely place, and tied him securely.

When she got back to the camp in the cedars the rider was there, on his knees, kindling the fire. His clean-shaved face and new apparel made him

vastly different. He was young, and, had he not been so gaunt, he would have been fine-looking, Lucy thought.

"Wildfire remembered me," Lucy burst out. "He wasn't a bit scary. Let me handle him. Followed me to water."

"He's taken to you," replied the rider seriously. "I've heard of the like, but not so quick. Was he in a bad fix when you got to him yesterday?"

Lucy explained briefly.

"Aha! If that red devil has any love in him I'll never get it. I wish I could have done so much for him. But always when he sees me he'll remember."

Lucy saw that the rider could not bend his back, and evidently it pained him to try.

"Let me do that," she said.

"Thanks. It took about all my strength to get into this new outfit," he said, relinquishing his place to Lucy.

"Did you have any trouble gettin' away without tellin'—about me?" he asked.

"No. But I sure had a job with those packs," she replied.

"You must be a wonder with a horse."

"Well, Dad and Holley and Farlane argue much about me. Still, I guess they all agree I can ride."

"Holley an' Farlane are riders?" he questioned.

"Yes, Dad's right-hand men."

"I wonder if he would give me a job?"

Lucy glanced up quickly. The idea surprised her—pleased her. "In a minute," she replied. "And he'd be grand to you. You see, he'd have an eye for Wildfire."

He remained silent, and Lucy, busy about the campfire, did not speak again till the simple fare was ready. Then she spread a tarpaulin in the shade.

They began to eat. Lucy's excitement, her sense of the unreality of this adventure, in no wise impaired her appetite.

"I mustn't stay long," she said, suddenly remembering.

"Will you come back—again?" he asked.

The question startled Lucy. "Why—I—I don't know. Won't you ride in to the Ford just as soon as you're able?"

"I reckon not."

"But it's the only place where there's people in hundreds of miles. Surely you won't try to go back—the way you came?"

"When Wildfire left that country I left it. We can't go back."

"Then you've no people—no one you care for?"

"There's no one. I'm an orphan. My people were lost in an Indian massacre—with a wagon train crossin' Wyomin'. A few escaped, an' I was one of the youngsters. I had a tough time, like a stray dog, till I grew up. An' then I took to the desert."

"Oh, I see. I—I'm sorry," replied Lucy. "What will you do now?"

"I'll stay here till my back straightens out. Will you ride out again?"

"Yes," replied Lucy without looking at him.

Then he asked her about the Ford, and Bostil, and the ranches and villages north, and the riders and horses. Lucy told him everything she knew and could think of, and, lastly, after waxing eloquent on the horses of the uplands, particularly Bostil's, she gave him a graphic account of Cordts and Dick Sears.

"Horse thieves!" exclaimed the rider darkly. "Where does this band hang out?"

"No one knows. Holley says they hide up in the canyon country."

"Aren't there any hunters at Bostil's Ford?"

"Wild-horse hunters, you mean?"

"No. Bear an' deer hunters."

"There's none. And I suppose that's why we're not familiar with the wild canyon country. I'd like to ride in there sometime and camp. But our people don't go in for that. They love the open ranges. No one I know, except a half-witted boy, ever rode down among these monuments. And how wonderful a place! It can't be more than twenty miles from home. I must be going soon. I'm forgetting Sage King. Did I tell you I was training him for the races?"

"No, you didn't. What races? Tell me," he replied with keen interest.

Then Lucy told him about the great passion of her father—about the long, time-honored custom of free-for-all races and the great races that had been run in the past; about the Creeches and their swift horses; about the rivalry and speculation and betting; and lastly about the races to be run in a few weeks—races so wonderful in prospect that even Cordts had begged to be allowed to attend.

"I'm going to see the King beat Creech's roan," shouted the rider, with red in his cheeks and a flash in his eye.

His enthusiasm warmed Lucy's interest. Suppose Wildfire was to enter the races! It was probable that he could run away from the whole field—even beat the King. Lucy thrilled and thrilled. What a surprise it would be! Then suddenly all these flashing ideas coruscated seemingly into a gleam—a leaping, radiant, wonderful thought.

"Let *me* ride your Wildfire in the great race?" she cried breathlessly.

His response was instantaneous—a smile that was keen and sweet and strong, and a proffered hand. Impulsively Lucy clasped that hand with both hers.

"You don't mean it," she said. "Oh, it's what Auntie would call one of my wild dreams! And I'm growing up—they say. But— Oh, if I could ride Wildfire against the field in that race—*if I only could!*"

"You can ride him. I reckon I'd like to see that horse race just as much as Bostil or Cordts or any man. An' see here, girl, Wildfire can beat this gray racer of your father's. The tame horse doesn't step on this earth that can run with Wildfire."

"How can we plan it?" went on Lucy impulsively. She had forgotten to withdraw her hands from his. "It must be a surprise—a complete surprise. If you came to the Ford we couldn't keep it secret. And Dad or Farlane would prevent me, somehow."

"It's easy. Ride out here as often as you can. Bring a light saddle an' let me put you up on Wildfire. You'll run him, train him, get him in shape. Then the day of the races or the night before I'll go in an' hide out in the sage till you come or send for Wildfire."

"Oh, it'll be glorious," she cried.

"Well, is it settled?" queried the rider strangely.

She was startled into self-consciousness by his tone. "You mean—that I ride Wildfire?" she replied shyly. "Yes, if you'll let me."

"I'll be proud."

"You're very good. And do you think Wildfire can beat the King?"

"I know it."

"But it will be a grand race."

"I reckon so. The only question is—*can* you ride him?"

"Yes. I never saw the horse I couldn't ride."

"It's settled, then. I'll camp here. I'll be well in a few days. Then I'll take Wildfire in hand. You will ride out whenever you have a chance, without bein' seen. An' the two of us will train the stallion to upset that race."

"Yes—then—it's settled."

Lucy's gaze was impelled and held by the rider's. She seemed to have known him long.

"What's your name?" she asked.

"Lin Slone," replied the rider.

Then she released her hands. "I must ride in now. If this isn't a dream I'll come back soon." She led Sage King to a rock and mounted him.

"It's good to see you up there," said Slone. "An' that splendid horse! He knows what he is. It'll break Bostil's heart to see that horse beat."

"Dad'll feel bad, but it'll do him good," replied Lucy.

Slone went close to the King and, putting a hand on the pommel, he looked up at Lucy. "Maybe—it is—a dream—an' you won't come back," he said with unsteady voice.

"Then I'll come in dreams," she flashed. "Be careful of yourself. Good-by."

Chapter Ten

"Wildfire Will Be Yours!"

A FORTNIGHT slipped by on the wings of time. Lucy was riding Sarchedon down into the sage toward the monuments with a whole day before her. Bostil kept more and more to himself, a circumstance that worried her, though she thought little about it. Van had taken up the training of the King; and Lucy had deliberately quarreled with him so that she would be free to ride where she listed.

Things had happened at the Ford which would have concerned Lucy greatly had she not been over-excited about her own affairs. Someone had ambushed Bostil in the cottonwoods near his house and had shot at him, narrowly missing him. Bostil had sworn he recognized the shot as having come from a rifle, and that he knew to whom it belonged. The river was still low. The boat had not been repaired. And Creech's horses were still on the other side.

"Oh, I oughtn't to go," she said aloud. But she did not even check Sarchedon's long swing, his rocking-chair lope. She had said a hundred times that she ought not go again out to the monuments. For Lin Slone had fallen despairingly, terribly in love with her.

It was not this, she averred, but the monuments and the beautiful Wildfire that had woven a spell round her she could not break. But this morning there came to Lucy the first vague doubt of herself. Once entering her mind, that doubt became clear. And then she vowed she liked Slone as she might a brother.

She trembled. She was in a rage with herself. She spurred Sarchedon into a run and tore through the sage, down into the valley, running him harder than she should have run him. Then she checked him, and, penitent, petted him out of all proportion to her thoughtlessness.

Lucy saw that her own impulsiveness had amounted to daring. She had gone too far. She had spent many hours alone with a rider, to his undo-

ing. She could not excuse that. She was ashamed. What would he say when she told him she could see him no more? The thought made her weak.

Lin Slone had changed his camp and had chosen a pass high up where the great walls had begun to break into sections. The camp was in a clump of cedars surrounding a spring.

Lucy did not approach this camp from that roundabout trail which she had made upon the first occasion of her visiting Slone. He had found an opening in the wall, and by riding this way into the pass Lucy cut off miles.

This morning she espied Slone at his outlook on a high rock that had fallen from the great walls. She always looked to see if he was there, and she always saw him.

She waved her hand from afar, and he waved in reply. Then as she reached the cedared part of the pass Slone was no longer visible. She put Sarchedon to a run up the hard, wind-swept sand, and reached the camp before Slone had climbed down from his perch.

Lucy dismounted reluctantly. What would he say about the riding-habit that she wore? The skirt made her more of a girl, it seemed.

"Hello, Lin!" she called.

"Good mornin'–Lucy," he replied very slowly. He was looking at her, she thought, with different eyes.

Slone gazed so long at her that Lucy could not keep silent. She laughed.

"How do you like–me–in this?"

"I like you much better," Slone said, bluntly.

"Auntie made this–and she's been trying to get me to ride in it."

"It changes you, Lucy. But can you ride as well?"

"I'm afraid not. What's Wildfire going to think of me?"

"He'll like you better, too."

Lucy unsaddled Sarchedon and turned him loose to graze while Slone went out after Wildfire. And presently it appeared that Lucy might have some little time to wait. Wildfire had lately been trusted to hobbles, which fact made it likely that he had strayed.

Lucy gazed about her at the great looming red walls and out through the avenues to the gray desert beyond. This adventure of hers would soon have an end, for the day of the races was not far distant, and after that it was obvious she would not have occasion to meet Slone. To think of never coming to the pass again gave Lucy a pang.

Slone returned presently with Wildfire. The stallion shone like a flame in the sunlight. His fear and hatred of Slone showed in the way he obeyed. Slone had mastered him, and must always keep the upper hand of him.

But Wildfire was a different horse when he saw Lucy. Day by day evidently Slone loved him more and tried harder to win a little of what Wildfire showed at sight of Lucy. Still Slone was proud of Lucy's control over the stallion. She had ridden Wildfire bareback at first, and then they had broken him to the saddle.

It was serious business, that training of Wildfire, and Slone had peculiar ideas regarding it. Lucy rode him up and down the pass until he was warm. Then Slone got on Sarchedon. He started out ahead of Lucy, and then they raced down the long pass. The course was hard-packed sand. Fast as Sarchedon was, and matchless as a horseman as was Slone the race was over almost as soon as it began.

Wildfire wanted to run, and the oth-

er horse made him fierce. Like a burr Lucy stuck low over his neck, and so light he would not have known he was carrying her but for the repeated calls in his ears. Lucy never spurred him.

This day she ran away from Slone, and, turning at the end of the two-mile course they had marked out, she loped Wildfire back. Slone turned with her, and they were soon in camp.

Slone dismounted and got Sarchedon out of the way, then crossed to where Lucy still fondled Wildfire. He paused a moment to look at her, but when she saw him he started again, and came close up to her as she sat the saddle.

"You went past me like a bullet," he said.

"Oh, can't he run!" murmured Lucy.

"Could he beat the King today?"

"Yes, he could—today. I know it," replied Lucy.

"You sure can ride him," replied Slone. "I can't see a fault anywhere—in him—or in your handling him. Somehow you an' Wildfire make a combination. You can't be beat."

"Do I ride him—well?" she asked softly.

"*I* could never ride him so well."

"Oh, Lin—you just want to please me. Why, Van couldn't ride with you."

"I don't care, Lucy," replied Slone stoutly. "You rode this horse perfect."

"What will Dad say, and Farlane, and Holley, and Van? Oh, I'll crow over Van," said Lucy. "I'm crazy to ride Wildfire out before all the Indians and ranchers and riders, before the races, just to show him off, to make them stare."

"No, Lucy. The best plan is to surprise them all. Enter your horse for the race, but don't show up till all the riders are at the start."

"Yes, that'll be best. And, Lin, only five days more—five days!"

"Sure—only five days more," repeated Slone slowly. "Does *anyone* at Bostil's Ford know you meet me out here?" he asked suddenly.

"Only Auntie. I told her the other day. She had been watching me. She thought things. So I told her."

"What did she say?" went on Slone curiously.

"She was mad," replied Lucy. "She scolded me. But I coaxed her not to tell on me."

"I want to know what she said," spoke up the rider deliberately.

Lucy blushed, and it was a consciousness of confusion as well as Slone's tone that made her half-angry.

"She said when I was found out there'd be a—a great fuss at the Ford. There would be talk. Auntie said I'm now a grown-up girl. Oh, she carried on! Dad would likely shoot you. And if Slone didn't some of the riders would—Oh, Lin, it was perfectly ridiculous the way Auntie talked."

"I reckon not," replied Slone. "I'm afraid I've done wrong to let you come out here."

"It's my own business," declared Lucy spiritedly. "And I guess they'd better let you alone."

"Lucy, there won't be any doubt about my stand—when I meet Bostil," said Slone.

"What do you mean?" Lucy trembled a little.

There was a sternness about Slone, a dignity that seemed new. "I'll ask him to—to let you marry me."

"Nonsense!" she exclaimed shortly.

"I reckon the possibility is—that," replied Slone bitterly, "but my motive isn't."

"It *is*. Why, you've known me only a few days— Dad would be mad. And if

Wildfire beats the King! Whew!"

"*When* Wildfire beats the King, not *if*," corrected Slone.

"Dad will be dangerous," warned Lucy. "Please don't–don't ask him that. Then everybody would know I–I –you–you–"

"Maybe you misunderstand," he began presently. And his voice was not steady. "My askin' Bostil for you doesn't mean I've any hope–it's just I want him an' everybody to know that I asked."

"But Dad–everybody will think that *you* think there's reason–why–I–why, you *ought* to ask," burst out Lucy, with scarlet face.

"Sure, that's it," he replied.

"Lin Slone, I'll never forgive you if you ask Dad that," declared Lucy.

"I reckon that's not so important."

"Oh!–so you don't care." She tried to control her temper so she could think.

"Please don't go to Dad." She put a hand on Slone's arm as he stood close up to Wildfire.

"I reckon I will," he said.

"Lin!" In that word there was an intimacy she had never granted him until that moment.

He put a shaking hand on hers and crushed her gauntleted fingers. And Lucy pressed her small hand to his.

"Lin! Promise not to–speak to Dad!"

"No." His voice rang.

"Don't give me away–don't tell Dad!"

"What?" he queried incredulously.

"Lin, if you tell Dad–then he'll know –and there *won't* be any hope for you!" cried Lucy honestly.

If Slone caught the significance of her words he did not believe it.

"I'm goin' to Bostil after the race an' ask him. That's settled," declared Slone, stubbornly.

At this Lucy utterly lost her temper. "Oh! you–you fool!" she cried.

Slone drew back suddenly as if struck, and a spot of dark blood leaped to his lean face. "No! It seems to me the right way."

Lucy threw the bridle to Slone. "I won't ride your horse in the race!" she declared with sudden passion. She felt herself shaking all over.

"Lucy Bostil, I wish I was as sure of heaven as I am you'll be up on Wildfire in that race," he said.

"I won't ride your horse."

"*My* horse. Oh, I see–but you'll ride Wildfire."

"I won't."

Slone suddenly turned white, and his eyes flashed dark fire. "You won't be able to help ridin' him any more than I could help it."

"A lot you know about me, Lin Slone!" returned Lucy, with scorn. "I can be as–as bullheaded as you, any day."

Slone evidently controlled his temper, though his face remained white. He even smiled at her.

"You love Wildfire. An' that stallion –that killer of horses, why he follows you, he whistles for you, he runs like lightnin' for you; he *loves* you."

"Never! I'll never ride your Wildfire *again!*" she said, very low.

"*Mine!* So that's the trouble. Well, Wildfire won't be mine when you ride the race."

Slone strode toward her. Lucy backed against the cedar tree and could go no farther. How white he was now! Lucy's heart gave a great, fearful leap, for she imagined Slone intended to take her in his arms. But he did not.

"When you ride–Wildfire in that –race he'll be–*yours!*" said Slone

huskily, his dark eyes flashing.

"You–give–Wildfire–to me?" gasped Lucy.

"Yes. Right now."

The rider's white face and dark eyes showed the strain of great and passionate sacrifice.

"Lin Slone! I can't–understand you."

"You've got to ride Wildfire in that race. You've got to beat the King. So I give Wildfire to you. An' now you can't help but ride him."

"Why–why do you give him–to me?" faltered Lucy.

"Because you love Wildfire. An' Wildfire loves you. If that isn't reason enough–then–because I love him–as no rider ever loved a horse– An' I love you as no man ever loved a girl!"

She dropped her head. She knew she was quivering like a leaf, with no power to control her muscles. And suddenly she found herself sitting at the foot of the cedar, weeping, with tear-wet hands over her face.

"There's nothin' to–to cry about," Slone was saying. "But I'm sorry if I hurt you."

"Will – you – please – fetch Sarch?" asked Lucy tremulously.

Slone brought Sarchedon. Lucy put on her gauntlets, and, mounting the horse, she took a moment to arrange her skirts before she looked down at Slone.

"Lin, I won't take Wildfire," she said.

"Yes, you will. You can't refuse. Remember he's grown to look to you. It wouldn't be right by the horse."

"But he's all you have in the world," she protested. Yet she knew any protestations would be in vain.

"No. I have good old faithful Nagger."

"Suppose I won't accept him?"

"How could you refuse? Not for me, but for Wildfire's sake! But if you could be mean an' refuse, why, Wildfire can go back to the desert."

"No!" exclaimed Lucy.

"I reckon so."

Lucy paused a moment. How dry her tongue seemed! And her breathing was labored.

"Wildfire ought to have several more days' training–then a day of rest –and then the race," she said, turning again to look at Slone.

A smile was beginning to change the hardness of his face. "Yes, Lucy," he said.

"And I'll *have* to ride him?"

"You sure will–if he's ever to beat the King."

Lucy's eyes flashed blue. She saw the crowd–the curious, friendly Indians–the eager riders–the spirited horses–the face of her father–and last the race itself, such a race as had never been run, so swift, so fierce, so wonderful.

"Then Lin," began Lucy, with a slowly heaving breast, "if I accept Wildfire will you keep him for me–until–and if I accept him, and tell you why, will you promise to say–"

"Don't ask me again!" interrupted Slone hastily. "I *will* speak to Bostil."

"Wait, will you–promise not to say a word–a single word *to me*–till after the race?"

"A word–to you! What about?" he queried wonderingly.

"About–the– Because– Why, I'm– I'll accept your horse."

"Yes," he replied swiftly.

Lucy settled herself in the saddle and, shortening the bridle, she got ready to spur Sarchedon into a bolt.

"Lin, I'll accept Wildfire because I love you."

Sarchedon leaped forward. Lucy did

not see Slone's face nor hear him speak. Then she was tearing through the sage, out past the whistling Wildfire, with the wind sweet in her face. She did not look back.

Chapter Eleven

River of Hell

ALL through May Bostil seemed unaware of Lucy's long trips down into the sage. But he had observed them long before Holley and other riders had approached him with the information.

"Let her alone," he growled to his men. "She can take care of herself."

To himself, when alone, Bostil muttered, "Wonder what the kid has looked up now? Some mischief, I'll bet!" Nevertheless, he did not speak to her on the subject.

Toward the end of the month, when Somers returned from horse-hunting, Bostil put him and Shugrue to work upon the big flatboat down at the crossing. Bostil himself went down, and he walked—a fact apt to be considered unusual if it had been noticed.

"Put in new planks," was his order to the men. "An' pour hot tar in the cracks. Then when the tar dries shove her in—but I'll tell you when."

Every morning young Creech rowed over to see if the boat was ready to take the trip across to bring his father's horses back. The third morning of work on the boat Bostil met Joel down there.

"Bostil, my ole man is losin' sleep waitin' to git the hosses over," he said frankly. "Feed's almost gone."

"That'll be all right, Joel," replied Bostil. "You see, the river ain't begun to raise yet. How're the hosses comin' on?"

"Grand, sir—grand!" exclaimed the simple Joel. "Peg is runnin' faster than last year, but Blue Roan is leavin' her a mile. Dad's goin' to bet all he has. The roan can't lose this year."

Bostil felt like a bull bayed at by a hound. Blue Roan was a young horse, and every season he had grown bigger and faster. The King had reached the limit of his speed.

"I was advisin' Dad to swim the hosses over," declared Joel deliberately.

"A-huh! You was? An' why?" rejoined Bostil.

Joel's simplicity and frankness vanished, and with them his rationality. He looked queer. His contrasting eyes shot little malignant gleams. He muttered incoherently, and moved back toward the skiff, making violent gestures, and his muttering grew to shouting, though still incoherent. He got in the boat and started to row back over the river.

"Sure he's got a screw loose," observed Somers.

Bostil made no comment. He strode away from his men down to the river shore, and, finding a seat on a stone, he studied the slow eddying red current of the river and he listened. It had a thousand voices, but not the one Bostil wanted to hear.

The races were now only a few days off. Piutes and Navajos were camped out on the sage, and hourly the number grew as more came in. They were building cedar sunshades. Columns of blue smoke curled up here and there. Mustangs and ponies grazed everywhere, and a line of Indians extended along the race course, where trials

were being held. The village was full of riders, horse traders and hunters, and ranchers. Work on the ranges had practically stopped for the time being, and in another day or so every inhabitant of the country would be in Bostil's Ford.

Bostil walked into the village, grimly conscious that the presence of the Indians and riders and horses, the action and color and bustle, the near approach of the great raceday—these things that in former years had brought him keen delight and speculation—had somehow lost their tang. He had changed. Something was wrong in him. Finally the old excitement of betting and bantering took hold of him and he forgot his brooding.

Brackton's place, as always, was a headquarters for all visitors. Macomber had just come in full of enthusiasm and pride over the horse he had entered, and he had money to wager. Two Navajo chiefs, called by white men Old Horse and Silver, were there for the first time in years. They were ready to gamble horse against horse. Cal Blinn and his riders of Durango had arrived; likewise Colson, Sticks, and Burthwait, old friends and rivals of Bostil's.

For a while Brackton's was merry. There was some drinking and much betting. There were only two wagers against the King, and both were put up by Indians. Macomber was betting on second or third place for his horse in the big race. No odds of Bostil's tempted him.

"Say, where's Wetherby?" rolled out Bostil. "He'll back his hoss."

"Wetherby's ridin' over tomorrow," replied Macomber. "But you gotta bet him two to one."

"See hyar, Bostil," spoke up old Cal Blinn, "you jest wait till I git an eye on the King's runnin'. Mebbe I'll go you even money."

"An' as fer me, Bostil," said Colson, "I ain't set up yit which hoss I'll race."

"Brack, how many hosses entered now for the big race?" asked Bostil.

The lean, gray Brackton bent earnestly over his soiled ledger, while the riders and horsemen round him grew silent to listen.

"Thar's the Sage King, by Bostil," replied Brackton. "Blue Roan an' Peg, by Creech; Whitefoot, by Macomber; Rocks, by Holley; Hossshoes, by Blinn; Bay Charley, by Burthwait. Then thar's the two mustangs entered by Old Hoss an' Silver—an' last—Wildfire, by Lucy Bostil."

"What's thet last?" queried Bostil.

"Wildfire, by Lucy Bostil," repeated Brackton.

"Has the girl gone an' entered a hoss?"

"She sure has. She came in today, regular an' businesslike, writ her name an' her hoss's—here 'tis—an' put up the entrance money."

"Wal, I'll be damned!" exclaimed Bostil. "What's this hoss she calls Wildfire?"

"She sure didn't say," replied Brackton. "Holley an' Van an' some more of the boys was here. They joked her a little. You oughter seen the look Lucy give them. But fer once she seemed mum. She jest walked away mysterious like."

"Lucy's got a pony off some Indian, I reckon," returned Bostil, and he laughed. "Then thet makes ten hosses entered so far?"

"Right. An' there's sure to be one more. I guess the track's wide enough for twelve."

"Wal, Brack, there'll likely be one hoss out in front an' some stretched

out behind," replied Bostil dryly.

"Bostil, I 'most forgot," went on Brackton, "Cordts sent word by the Piutes who come today thet he'd be here sure."

Bostil's face subtly changed. The light seemed to leave it. He did not reply to Brackton—did not show that he heard the comment on all sides. Public opinion was against Bostil's permission to allow Cordts and his horse thieves to attend the races.

"When's Creech's hosses comin' over?" asked Colson with sudden interest.

"Wal, I reckon—soon," replied Bostil constrainedly, and he turned away.

By the time he got home all the excitement of the past hour had left him and gloom again abided in his mind. He avoided his daughter and forgot the fact of her entering a horse in the race. He ate supper alone and went to his room, where he sat thinking in the dark. By and by all was quiet. Then seemingly with a wrench he bestirred himself.

Removing his boots, he put on a pair of moccasins. He slipped out of the house; he kept to the flagstone of the walk; he took to the sage till out of the village, and then he sheered round to the river trail. With the sureness of an Indian he went down through that pitch-black canyon to the river and the ford.

The river seemed absolutely the same as during the day. He peered through the dark opaqueness of gloom. It moved there, the river he knew, shadowy, mysterious, murmuring. Bostil went down to the edge of the water, and, sitting there, he listened. His mind held only one idea and was riveted round it. He strained his hearing, so long, so intently, that at last he knew he had heard what he was longing for. Then in the gloom he took to the trail, and returned home as he had left, stealthily, like an Indian.

But Bostil did not sleep nor rest.

Next morning early he rode down to the river. Somers and Shugrue had finished the boat and were waiting. Other men were there, curious and eager. Joel Creech, barefooted and ragged, with hollow eyes and strange actions, paced the sands.

The boat was lying bottom up. Bostil examined the new planking and the seams. Then he straightened.

"Turn her over," he ordered. "Shove her in. An' let her soak up today."

The men seemed glad and relieved. Joel Creech heard and he came near to Bostil.

"You'll—you'll fetch Dad's hosses over?" he queried.

"Sure. Tomorrow," replied Bostil cheerily.

"Now, Bostil, I'm sorry fer what I said," blurted Joel.

"Shut up. Go tell your old man."

Joel ran down to his skiff and, leaping in, began to row vigorously across. Bostil watched while the workmen turned the boat over and slid it off the sand bar and tied it securely to the mooring.

That night when all was quiet in and around the village Bostil emerged from his house and took to his stealthy stalk down toward the river.

The distance seemed short. The boat lay at the mooring, one end resting lightly on the sand bar. With strong, nervous clutch Bostil felt the knots of the cables. Then he peered into the opaque gloom of that strange and huge V-shaped split between the great canyon walls.

He strode down to the water and,

sitting upon the stone he had occupied so often, he listened. He turned his ear upstream, then downstream, and to the side, and again upstream and listened.

The river seemed the same. It splashed very softly and murmured low and gurgled faintly. It gave forth fitful little swishes and musical tinkles and lapping sounds. It was a river of mystery telling a lie with its low music. As Bostil listened all those soft, watery sounds merged into what seemed a moaning, and that moaning held a roar so low as to be only distinguishable to the ear trained by years.

And as Bostil heard he trembled. What was the thing he meant to do? A thousand thoughts assailed him in answer and none were clear. A chill passed over him. Suddenly he felt that the cold stole up from his feet. They were both in the water. He pulled them out and, bending down, watched the dim, dark line of water. It moved up and up, inch by inch, swiftly. The river was on the rise!

Bostil leaped up. "By God! I had it right—she is risin'!" he exclaimed hoarsely.

He stared in fascinated certainty at the river. He began to pace the sands. He thought of those beautiful race horses across the river.

"It's not too late!" he muttered. "I can get the boat over an' back—yet!"

He knew that on the morrow the Colorado in flood would bar those horses, imprison them in a barren canyon, shut them in to starve.

It'd be hellish! Bostil, you can't do it. You ain't thet kind of a man. Bostil poison a water hole where hosses loved to drink, or burn over grass! What would Lucy think of you? No, Bostil, you've let spite rule bad. Hurry now and save them hosses!

He strode down to the boat. It swung clear now, and there was water between it and the shore. Bostil laid hold of the cables. As he did so he thought of Creech and a blackness enfolded him. He forgot Creech's horses. Had not his enemy's son shot at him from ambush? Was not his very life at stake? A terrible blow must be dealt Creech, one that would crush him or else lend him manhood enough to come forth with a gun.

He fell to pacing to and fro in the gloom. Every moment the river changed its voice. In an hour flood would be down. Too late, then! Bostil again remembered the sleek, slim, racy thoroughbreds—Blue Roan, a wild horse he had longed to own, and Peg, a mare that had no equal in the uplands.

He grew strong, hard, fierce, and implacable. He found himself. He strode back to the cables. The knots, having dragged in the water, were soaking wet and swollen. He could not untie them. Then he cut one strand after another. The boat swung out beyond his reach. Instinctively Bostil reached to pull it back.

"My God! It's goin'!" he whispered. "What have I done?"

The roar of the river rose weird and mournful and incessant, with few breaks, and these were marked by strange ripping and splashing sounds made as the bulges of water broke on the surface. Twenty feet out the boat floated, turning a little as it drifted. It seemed loath to leave. It held on the shore eddy. Hungrily, spitefully the little, heavy waves lapped it. Bostil watched it with dilating eyes. There! the current caught one end and the water rose in a hollow splash over the corner. An invisible hand, like a

mighty giant's, seemed to swing the boat out. The vague shape passed from Bostil's strained gaze.

"So help me God, I've done it!" he groaned hoarsely. And he staggered back and sat down. He suffered physical agony, as if a wolf gnawed him internally.

"To hell with Creech an' his hosses, but where do I come in as a man?" he whispered. And he sat there, arms tight around his knees, locked both mentally and physically into inaction.

The rising water broke the spell and drove him back. The river was creeping no longer. It swelled. And the roar likewise swelled. Bostil hurried across the flat to get to the rocky trail before he was cut off, and the last few rods he waded in water up to his knees.

"I'll leave no trail there," he muttered.

And there at the foot of the rocky trail he halted to watch and listen. The old memorable boom came to his ears. The flood was coming. For 23 years he had heard the vanguard boom of the Colorado in flood. But never like this, for in the sound he heard the strife and passion of his blood, and realized himself a human counterpart of that remorseless river.

A breeze puffed into Bostil's face. It brought a tremendous thunder, as if all the colossal walls were falling in avalanche. Bostil knew the crest of the flood had turned the corner above and would soon reach him. All his body felt cold, and he backed up and up, with dead feet.

The shadows of the canyon lightened. A river-wide froth, like a curtain, moved down, spreading mushroom-wise before it, a rolling, heaving maelstrom. Bostil ran to escape the great wave that surged into the amphitheater, up and up the rocky trail. When he turned again he seemed to look down into hell. Murky depths, streaked by pale gleams, and black, sinister, changing forms yawned beneath them. He watched with fixed eyes until once more the feeling of filled ears left him and an awful thundering boom assured him of actualities. It was only the Colorado in flood

Chapter Twelve

The Race

BOSTIL slept that night, but his sleep was troubled, and a strange, dreadful roar seemed to run through it, like a mournful wind over a dark desert. He was awakened early by a voice at his window.

"Bostil! Bostil!" It was Holley's voice.

Bostil rolled off the bed. He had slept without removing any apparel except his boots.

"Wal, Hawk, what d'ye mean wakin' a man at this unholy hour?" growled Bostil.

Holley's face appeared above the rude sill. "It ain't so awful early," he said. "Listen, Boss."

Bostil halted in the act of pulling on a boot. He looked at his man while he listened. The still air outside seemed filled with low boom, like thunder at a distance. Bostil tried to look astounded.

"Hell! It's the Colorado! She's boomin'!"

"Reckon it's hell all right – for Creech," replied Holley. "Boss, why didn't you fetch them hosses over?"

Bostil's face darkened. "Holley,

you're sure powerful anxious about Creech. Are you his friend?"

"Naw! I've little use fer Creech," replied Holley. "An' you know thet. But I hold for his hosses as I would any man's."

"A-huh! An' what's your kick?"

"Nothin'—except you could have fetched them over before the flood come down. That's all."

The old horse trader and his right-hand rider looked at each other for a moment in silence. They understood each other. Then Bostil returned to the task of pulling on wet boots and Holley went away.

Bostil opened his door and stepped outside. The eastern ramparts of the desert were bright red with the rising sun. With the night behind him and the morning cool and bright and beautiful, Bostil did not suffer a pang nor feel a regret. He went in to breakfast.

He encountered Lucy in the kitchen, and he could tell from her smiling greeting that he seemed to her his old self again.

She was radiant. Her blue eyes danced. She looked excited. She had been telling her aunt something, and that worthy woman appeared at once shocked and delighted.

"Now I rode in on some confab or other, that's sure," said Bostil good-naturedly.

"You sure did, Dad," replied Lucy with a bright smile.

"Jane, what's this kid up to?" asked Bostil, turning to his sister.

"The good Lord only knows!" replied Aunt Jane with a sigh.

"Kid? See here, Dad, I'm eighteen long ago. I'm grown up. I can do as I please, go where I like, and anything—why, Dad, I could get—married."

"Haw! haw!" laughed Bostil. "Jane, hear the girl."

"I hear her, Bostil," sighed Aunt Jane.

"Wal, Lucy, I'd just like to see you fetch some fool lovesick rider around when I'm feelin' good," said Bostil.

Lucy tossed her bright head, but did not answer.

"Jane, what's got into her?" asked Bostil, appealing to his sister.

"Bostil, she's in fun, of course," declared Aunt Jane. "Come to your breakfast, now."

Bostil took his seat at the table, glad that he could once more be amiable with his womenfolk. "Lucy, tomorrow'll be the biggest day Bostil's Ford ever seen," he said.

"It sure will be, Dad. The biggest *surprising* day the Ford ever had," replied Lucy.

"Who's goin' to get surprised?"

"Everybody."

"Brackton tells me you've entered a hoss against the field."

"It's an open race, isn't it?"

"Open as the desert, Lucy," he replied. "What's this hoss Wildfire you've entered?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" taunted Lucy.

"If he's as good as his name you might be in at the finish. But, Lucy, my dear, talkin' good sense now—you ain't a-goin' to go up on some unbroken mustang in this big race?"

"Dad, I'm going to ride a horse."

"Wal, I ain't afraid of your handlin' of a hoss," he said soberly. "An' as long as you're in earnest I won't stop you. But, Lucy, no bettin'. I won't let you gamble."

"Not even with you?" she coaxed.

Bostil stared at the girl. What had gotten into her? "What'll you bet?" he queried with blunt curiosity.

"Dad, I'll go you a hundred dollars in gold that I finish one–two–three."

Bostil threw back his head to laugh heartily. What a chip of the old block she was! "Child, there's some fast hosses that'll be back of the King. You'd be throwin' away money."

Blue fire shone in his daughter's eyes. She meant business, all right, and Bostil thrilled with pride in her.

"Dad, I'll bet you two hundred, even, that I beat the King!" she flashed.

"Wal, of all the nerve!" ejaculated Bostil. "No, I won't take you up. Reckon I never before turned down an even bet. Understand, Lucy, ridin' in the race is enough for you."

"All right, Dad," replied Lucy.

At that juncture Bostil suddenly shoved back his plate and turned his face to the open door. "Don't I hear a runnin' hoss?"

Aunt Jane stopped the noise she was making, and Lucy darted to the door.

"It's the King with Van up," said Lucy, from the door. "Dad, Van's jumped off–he's coming in–he's running. Something has happened–there are other horses coming–riders–Indians."

Bostil prepared himself.

"Hello, Miss Lucy! Where's Bostil?"

"Come in, boy," said Bostil. "What're you flustered about?"

Van strode in, spurs jangling, cap in hand. "Boss, there's–a sixty-foot raise–in the river!" Van panted.

"Oh!" cried Lucy, wheeling toward her father.

"Wal, Van, I reckon I knowed thet," replied Bostil. "Mebbe I'm gettin' old, but I can still hear– Listen."

Lucy tiptoed to the door and turned her head sidewise and slowly bowed it till she stiffened.

"Highest flood we–ever seen," said Van.

"You've been down?" queried Bostil, sharply.

"Not to the river," replied Van. "I went as far as–where the gulch opens –on the bluff. There was a string of Navajos goin' down. An' some comin' up. I stayed there watchin' the flood, an' pretty soon Somers come up the trail with Blakesley an' Brack an' some riders. An' Somers hollered out, 'The boat's gone!' "

"Gone!" exclaimed Bostil.

"Oh, Dad! Oh, Van!" cried Lucy, with eyes wide and lips parted.

"Sure she's gone. An' the whole place down there–where the willows was an' the sand bar–it was deep under water."

"What will become of Creech's horses?" asked Lucy breathlessly.

"My God! ain't it a shame!" went on Bostil. He felt Lucy's blue eyes riveted upon his face.

"Thet's what we all was sayin'," went on Van. "While we was watchin' the awful flood an' listenin' to the deep bum–bum–bum of rollin' rocks someone seen Creech an' two Piutes leadin' the hosses up thet trail where the slide was. We counted the hosses–nine. An' we saw the roan shine blue in the sunlight."

"Piutes with Creech!" exclaimed Bostil, the deep gloom in his eyes lighting. "By all thet's lucky! Mebbe them Indians can climb the hosses out of thet hole an' find water an' grass enough."

"Mebbe," replied Van with doubt in his voice.

"With them Indians Creech has a chance to get his hosses out," declared Bostil. He was sure of his sincerity, but he was not certain that his sincerity was not the birth of a strange, sudden hope. And then he was able to

meet the eyes of his daughter.

"Oh, Dad, why, why didn't you hurry Creech's horses over?" said Lucy.

Something tight within Bostil's breast seemed to ease and lessen. "Why didn't I? Wal, Lucy, I reckon I wasn't in no hurry to oblige Creech. I'm sorry now."

"It won't be so terrible if he doesn't lose the horses," murmured Lucy.

"Where's young Joel Creech?" asked Bostil.

"He stayed on this side last night," replied Van. "Fact is, Joel's the one first knew the flood was on. Someone said he said he slept in the canyon last night. Anyway, he's ravin' crazy now. An' if he doesn't do harm to someone or hisself I'll miss my guess."

"A-huh!" grunted Bostil. "Right you are."

"Dad, can't anything be done to help Creech now?" appealed Lucy, going close to her father.

Bostil put his arm around her and felt immeasurably relieved to have the golden head press close to his shoulder. "Child, we can't fly acrost the river. Now don't you cry about Creech's hosses. They ain't starved yet. It's hard luck. But mebbe it'll turn out so Creech'll lose only the race. An', Lucy, it was a dead-sure bet he'd have lost thet anyway."

Bostil fondled his daughter a moment, the first time in many a day, and then he turned to his rider at the door. "Van, how's the King?"

"Wild to run, Bostil, just plumb wild. There won't be any hoss with the ghost of a show tomorrow."

Lucy raised her drooping head. "Is *that* so, Van Sickle? Listen here—if you and Sage King don't get more wild running tomorrow than you ever had I'll never ride again!" With this retort Lucy left the room.

Van stared at the door and then at Bostil. "What'd I say, Bostil?" he asked plaintively. "I'm always r'ilin' her."

"Cheer up, Van. You didn't say much. Lucy is fiery these days. Come on out now. I want a look at the King."

The race course lay at the foot of the slope, and now the gray and purple sage was dotted with more horses and Indians, more moving things and colors, than Bostil had ever seen there before. It was a spectacle that stirred him. Many fires sent up blue columns of smoke from before the hastily built brush huts where the Indians cooked and ate. Blankets shone bright in the sun; burros grazed and brayed; horses whistled piercingly across the slope; Indians lolled before the huts or talked in groups, sitting and lounging on their ponies; down in the valley, here and there, were Indians racing, and others were chasing the wiry mustangs. Beyond this gay and colorful spectacle stretched the valley, merging into the desert marked so strikingly and beautifully by the monuments.

As Bostil dismounted, throwing the bridle to a rider, he saw a face that suddenly froze the thrilling delight of the moment. A tall, gaunt man with cavernous black eyes and huge, drooping black mustache fronted him and seemed waiting. Cordts!

"Bostil, how are you?" said Cordts. From his left hand hung a belt containing two heavy guns.

"Hello, Cordts," replied Bostil, slow-

ly unbending. Then he met the other's proffered hand.

"I've bet heavy on the King," said Cordts.

"Wal, I was hopin' you'd back some other hoss, so I could take your money," replied Bostil.

Cordts held out the belt and guns to Bostil. "I want to enjoy this race," he said.

"Cordts, I don't want to take your guns," replied Bostil bluntly. "I've taken your word an' that's enough."

"Thanks, Bostil. All the same, as I'm your guest I won't pack them," returned Cordts, and he hung the belt on the horn of Bostil's saddle. "Some of my men are with me. They were all right till they got outside of Brackton's whisky. But now I won't answer for them."

"Wal, you're square to say thet," replied Bostil. "An' I'll run this race an' answer for everybody."

Bostil recognized Hutchinson and Dick Sears, but the others of Cordts's gang he did not know. They were a hard-looking group. Hutchinson was a spare, stoop-shouldered, red-faced, squinty-eyed rider, branded all over with the marks of a bad man. And Dick Sears looked his notoriety. He was a little knot of muscle, short and bow-legged, rough in appearance as cactus.

Bostil turned away to the group of his riders and friends and asked for his daughter.

"Lucy's over there," said Farlane, pointing to a merry crowd.

Bostil waved a hand to her, and Lucy, evidently mistaking his action, came forward, leading one of her ponies. She wore a gray blouse with a red scarf, and a skirt over overalls and boots. She wore her hair in a braid, and had a red band tight above her forehead. Bostil took her in all at a glance. She meant business and she looked dangerous.

"Lucy, where's your hoss?" he asked curiously.

"Never you mind, Dad. I'll be there at the finish," she replied.

"Red's your color for today, then?" he questioned, as he put a big hand on the bright-banded head.

She nodded archly.

"Child, you sure mean to run in this race—the big one?"

"Sure and certain."

"Wal, the only bitter drop in my cup today will be seein' you get beat. But if you run second I'll give you a present thet'll make the purse look sick."

Even the Indian chiefs were smiling. Old Horse, the Navajo, beamed benignly upon this daughter of the friend of the Indians. Silver, his brother chieftain, nodded as if he understood Bostil's pride and regret.

"Miss Lucy, I sure hate to run a hoss against yours," said old Cal Blinn. Then Colson, Sticks, Burthwait, the other principals, paid laughing compliments to the bright-haired girl.

Bostil enjoyed this hugely until he caught the strange intensity of regard in the cavernous eyes of Cordts. That gave him a shock. Bostil regretted his impulse in granting the horse thief permission to attend the races.

"Lucy, go back to the women till you're ready to come out on your hoss," he said. "An' mind you, be careful today!"

He gave her a meaning glance, which she understood perfectly, he saw, and then he turned to start the day's sport.

The Indian races run in twos and threes, and on up to a number that crowded the race course; the betting

and yelling and running; the wild and plunging mustangs; the heat and dust and pounding of hoofs; the excited betting; the surprises and defeats and victories; the trial tests of the principals, jealously keeping off to themselves in the sage; the endless moving, colorful procession, gaudy and swift and thrilling—all these Bostil loved tremendously.

But they were as nothing to what they gradually worked up to—the climax—the great race.

It was afternoon when all was ready for this race, and the sage was bright gray in the westering sun. Everybody was resting, waiting. The tense quiet of the riders seemed to settle upon the whole assemblage. Only the thoroughbreds were restless. They quivered and stamped and tossed their heads. They knew what was going to happen. They wanted to run.

Bostil himself took the covering off his favorite. Sage King was on edge. He stood out strikingly in contrast with the other horses. His sage-gray body was as sleek and shiny as satin.

Sage King was the favorite in the betting, the Indians, who were ardent gamblers, plunging heavily on him.

Bostil saddled the horse and was long at the task. Van stood watching. He was pale and nervous. Bostil saw this.

"Van," he said, "it's your race."

The rider reached a quick hand for bridle and horn, and when his foot touched the stirrup Sage King was in the air. He came down, springy—quick, graceful, and then he pranced into line with the other horses.

Bostil waved his hand. Then the troop of riders and racers headed for the starting-point, two miles up the valley. Macomber and Blinn, with a rider and a Navajo, were up there as the official starters of the day.

Bostil's eyes glistened. He put a friendly hand on Cordts's shoulder, an action which showed the stress of the moment.

Suddenly Holley touched Bostil and pointed down the slope. "There's Lucy," he said. "She's ridin' out to join the bunch."

"Lucy! Where? I'd forgotten my girl! Where?"

"There," repeated Holley, and he pointed. Others of the group spoke up, having seen Lucy riding down.

"She's on a red hoss," said one.

" 'Pears all-fired big to me—her hoss," said another. "Who's got a glass?"

Bostil had the only field glass there and he was using it. Across the round, magnified field of vision moved a giant red horse, his mane waving like a flame. Lucy rode him. Bostil felt an added stir in his pulse beat. But the distance was long, the glass not perfect; he could not trust his sight.

"Holley, I can't make out nothin'," he complained. "Take the glass. Give me a line on Lucy's mount."

"Boss, I don't need the glass to see that she's up on a *hoss*," replied Holley, as he took the glass. He leveled it, adjusted it to his eyes, and then looked long.

"Wal, can't you see any better'n me?" queried Bostil eagerly.

Holley at last spoke: "She's up on a wild stallion. He's red, like fire. He's mighty big—strong. Looks as if he didn't want to go near the bunch. Lord! what action! Bostil, I'd say—a great hoss!"

There was a moment's intense silence in the group round Bostil. Holley was never known to mistake a horse or to be extravagant in judgment

or praise.

"A wild stallion!" echoed Bostil. "A-huh! An' she calls him Wildfire."

Then everybody watched the close, dark mass of horses and riders down the valley. And all waited for Holley to speak.

"They're linin' up," began the rider. "Havin' some muss, too, it 'pears. Bostil, thet red hoss is raisin' hell! He wants to fight. There! he's up in the air— Boys, he's a devil, a killer like all them wild stallions. He's plungin' at the King—strikin'! There! Lucy's got him down. She's handlin' him— Now they've got the King on the other side. Thet's better. But Lucy's hoss won't stand. Anyway, it's a runnin' start.

"Van's got the best position. Foxy Van! He'll be leadin' before the rest know the race's on. Them Indian mustangs are behavin' scandalous. Guess the red stallion scared 'em. Now they're all lined up back of the post. . . . Ah! gunsmoke! They move—it looks like a go."

Then Holley was silent, strained in watching. So were all the watchers silent. Bostil saw far down the valley a moving, dark line of horses.

"They're off! They're off!" called Holley thrillingly.

Bostil uttered a deep and booming yell, which rose above the shouts of the men round him and was heard even in the din of Indian cries. Then as quickly as the yells had risen they ceased.

Holley stood up on the rock with leveled glass.

"Mac's dropped the flag. It's a sure go. Now! Van's out there front—inside. The King's got his stride. Boss, the King's stretchin' out! Look! Look! see thet red hoss leap! Bostil, he's runnin' down the King! I knowed it. He's like lightnin'. He's pushin' the King over—off the course! See him plunge! Lord! Lucy can't pull him! She goes up—down—tossed—but she sticks like a burr. Good, Lucy! Hang on! My Gawd, Bostil, the King's thrown! He's down! He comes up, off the course. The others flash by—Van's out of the race! An' Bostil—an', gentlemen, there ain't anythin' more to this race but a red hoss!"

Bostil's heart gave a great leap and then seemed to stand still. What a horrible, sickening disappointment. Rage, impotent rage, possessed him. He cursed Van, he swore he would kill that red stallion.

Someone shook him hard. Someone's incisive words cut into his throbbing ears: "Luck of the game! The King ain't beat! He's only out!"

Then the rider's habit of mind asserted itself and Bostil began to recover. Even if the King were out it was a Bostil who would win the great race.

His dimmed sight grew clear and sharp. And with a gasp he saw the moving, dark line take shape as horses.

A bright horse was in the lead. Brighter and larger he grew. Swiftly and more swiftly he came on. The bright color changed to red. Bostil heard Holley calling and Cordts calling —and other voices, but he did not distinguish what was said. The line of horses began to bob, to bunch. The race looked close, despite what Holley had said. The Indians were beginning to lean forward, here and there uttering a short, sharp yell. Bostil forgot the King.

Then Holley bawled into his ear, "They're halfway!"

The race was beautiful. Bostil strained his eyes. He gloried in what he saw —Lucy low over the neck of that red stallion. He could see plainer now.

They were coming closer. How swiftly! The million thrills within Bostil coalesced into one great shudder of rapture. He grew wet with sweat. His stentorian voice took up the call for Lucy to win.

"Three-quarters!" bawled Holley into Bostil's ear. "An' Lucy's give thet wild hoss free rein! Look, Bostil! You never in your life seen a hoss run like thet!"

Bostil never had. That flame of a horse was running away from the others. And now they were close—coming into the home stretch. A deafening roar from the onlookers engulfed all other sounds. A straining, stamping, arm-flinging horde surrounded Bostil.

Bostil saw Lucy's golden hair whipping out from the flame-streaked mane. And then he could only see that red brute of a horse. Wildfire before the wind! Bostil thought of the leaping prairie flame, storm-driven.

On came the red stallion—on—on! What a tremendous stride! What a marvelous recovery! What ease! What savage action!

He flashed past, low, pointed, long, going faster every magnificent stride—winner by a dozen lengths.

Chapter Thirteen

A Streak of Dust

WILDFIRE ran on down the valley far beyond the yelling crowd lined along the slope. Bostil was deaf to the throng; he watched the stallion till Lucy finally forced him to stop and turn.

Then Bostil whirled to see where Van was with the King. Holley's Whitefoot had run second, and the Navajo's mustang third.

"Boss, he run second!" Holley kept repeating.

Bostil had the heart to shake hands with Holley and say he was glad, when it was on his lips to blurt out there had been no race. Then Bostil's nerves tingled at sight of Van trotting the King up the course toward the slope.

Van rode straight up the slope and leaped off. He was white and shaking.

The King's glossy hide was dirty with dust and bits of cactus and brush. He was not even hot. There did not appear to be a bruise or mark on him.

"Wal, Van, get it out of your system," said Bostil.

"Thet red hoss scared the race out of the King before the start," Van said swiftly. "Lucy pulled him off the King twice—he meant to kill the King!

"We got started, an' I took the lead. I never looked back till I heard Lucy scream. She couldn't pull Wildfire; he was rushin' the King, meant to kill him. Sage King wanted to fight too; I couldn't keep him runnin'. Wildfire got in close an' bit at the King's neck. Lucy pulled till I yelled she'd throw the hoss an' kill us both.

"Then Wildfire jumped an' hit us, an' we went down. I had a bad spill but the King's not hurt. Boss, thet hoss is hell!"

"It was hard luck, Van," said Bostil; "no race. Take him home."

"Reckon here's the feller'll take the prize money," remarked Holley, pointing to a man who rode a huge, shaggy black horse and was leading Lucy's pony.

"An' here comes Lucy ridin' the stallion back," added Shugrue.

Lucy waved her hand, and the strange rider to whom Holley had call-

ed attention strode out of the crowd toward Wildfire.

Bostil's gaze took in the splendid build of this lithe rider, the clean-cut face, the dark eyes. This fellow had a shiny, coiled lasso in hand. He advanced toward Wildfire. The stallion snorted and plunged.

The rider walked straight up to the trembling Wildfire. When Wildfire plunged and reared up and up the rider leaped for the bridle and with an iron arm pulled the horse down.

"Dad!" called Lucy faintly.

Bostil went forward, close, while the rider held Wildfire. Lucy was only a girl now, and weakening. Her fear, her pitiful little smile, as if she dared not hope for her father's approval yet could not help it, touched Bostil to the quick, and he opened his arms. Lucy slid down into them.

"Lucy, girl, you've won the King's race an' double-crossed your poor old dad!"

"Oh, Dad, I never knew—I never dreamed Wildfire—would jump the King," Lucy faltered. "I couldn't hold him. He was terrible. It made me sick. Daddy, tell me Van wasn't hurt—or the King!"

"The hoss's all right an' so's Van," replied Bostil. "Don't cry, Lucy. It was a fool trick you pulled off, but you did it great. By Gawd! you sure was ridin' thet red devil! An' say, it's all right with me!"

Bostil put her down and led her through the lines of admiring Indians and applauding riders, and left her with the women.

When he turned again he was in time to see the strange rider mount Wildfire. It was a swift and hazardous mount, the stallion being in the air. When he came down he tore the turf and sent it flying, and when he shot up again he was doubled in a red knot, bristling with fiery hair, a furious wild beast, mad to throw the rider. The rider had hooked his long spurs under the horse and now appeared a part of him.

The riders were all betting the horse would throw the stranger. And Bostil, seeing the gathering might of Wildfire's momentum, agreed with them. No horseman could stick on that horse. Suddenly Wildfire tripped in the sage, and went sprawling in the dust, throwing his rider ahead. Both man and beast were quick to rise, but the rider had a foot in the stirrup before Wildfire was under way.

Then the horse plunged, ran free, came circling back, and slowly gave way to the rider's control. Those few moments of frenzied activity had brought out the foam and the sweat—Wildfire was wet. The rider pulled him in before Bostil and dismounted.

"Sometimes I ride him; then sometimes I don't," he said, with a smile.

"Wal, you rode him longer'n any of us figgered," said Bostil, heartily shaking the man's hand. "I'm Bostil. Glad to meet you."

"My name's Slone—Lin Slone," replied the rider, frankly. "I'm a wild-horse hunter an' hail from Utah."

"Utah? How'd you ever get over? Wal, you've got a grand hoss—an' you put a grand rider up on him in the race—my girl Lucy—" He looked keenly into Slone's face.

"Bostil, I chased this wild horse days an' weeks an' months, hundreds of miles—across the canyon an' the river—"

"No!" interrupted Bostil blankly.

"Yes. I'll tell you how later. Out here somewhere I caught Wildfire, broke

him as much as he'll ever be broken. He played me out an' got away. Your girl rode along—saved my horse—an' saved my life, too. I was in bad shape for days. But I got well—an'—an' then she wanted me to let her run Wildfire in the big race. I couldn't refuse. An' it would have been a great race but for the unlucky accident to Sage King. I'm sorry, sir."

"Slone, it jarred me some, thet disappointment. But it's over," replied Bostil. "An' so thet's how Lucy found her hoss. She sure was mysterious. Wal, wal."

Bostil became aware of others behind him. "Holley, shake hands with Slone, hoss wrangler out of Utah. . . . You, too, Cal Blinn. . . . An' Macomber—an' Wetherby, meet my friend here—young Slone. . . . An', Cordts, shake hands with a feller thet owns a grand hoss!"

Bostil laughed as he introduced the horse thief to Slone. The others laughed too, even Cordts joining in.

"Howdy, Slone," drawled Cordts, with hand outstretched. "I sure am glad to meet yuh. I'd like to trade the Sage King for this red stallion!"

A roar of laughter greeted this sally, all but Bostil and Slone joining in. The joke was on Bostil, and he showed it. Slone did not even smile.

"Howdy, Cordts," he replied. "I'm glad to meet you—so I'll know you when I see you again."

"Wal, we're all good fellers today," interposed Bostil. "An' now let's ride home an' eat. Slone, you come with me."

The sun was low in the west; purple shades were blotting out the gold lights down the valley; the day of the great races was almost done. Indians were still scattered here and there in groups; others were turning out the mustangs; and the majority were riding and walking with the crowd toward the village.

Bostil observed that Cordts had hurried ahead of the group and now appeared to be saying something emphatic to Dick Sears and Hutchinson. Bostil heard Cordts curse. Probably he was arraigning the sullen Sears. Cordts had acted first-rate—had lived up to his word, as Bostil thought he would do. Cordts and Hutchinson mounted their horses and rode off, somewhat to the left of the scattered crowd. But Sears remained behind.

All the horses except Wildfire stood in a bunch back on the bench. Sears appeared to be fussing with the straps on his saddle.

Suddenly there came a halt in the conversation of the men, a curse in Holley's deep voice, a violent split in the group. Bostil wheeled to see Sears in a menacing position with two guns leveled low.

"Don't holler!" he called. "An' don't move!"

"What'n the hell now, Sears?" demanded Bostil.

"I'll bore you if you move—thet's what!" replied Sears.

"Holley, turn yer back!" ordered Sears.

The old rider, who stood foremost of the group, instantly obeyed, with hands up. He took no chances here, for he alone packed a gun. With swift steps Sears moved, pulled Holley's gun, flung it aside into the sage.

Bostil's face turned dark-blood color and his neck swelled. "By Gawd, Sears! You ain't a-goin' to steal this boy's hoss!"

"Shut up!" hissed the horse thief. He pushed a gun close to Bostil. "I've

always laid fer you! I'm achin' to bore you now. I would but fer scarin' this hoss. If you yap again I'll *kill you*, anyhow, an' take a chance!"

"Sears, if it's my horse you want you needn't kill Bostil," spoke up Slone.

"Lead him round hyar!" snapped Sears.

Wildfire appeared more shy of the horses back of him than of the men. Slone was able to lead him, however, to within several paces of Sears. Then Slone dropped the reins. He still held a lasso which was loosely coiled, and the loop dropped in front of him as he backed away.

Sears sheathed the left-hand gun. Keeping the group covered with the other, he moved backward, reaching for the hanging reins. Wildfire snorted, appeared about to jump. But Sears got the reins.

Then quick as a cat Sears vaulted into the saddle. Wildfire snorted and lifted his forefeet in a lunge that meant he would bolt.

Sears in vaulting up had swung the gun aloft. He swept it down, but waveringly, for Wildfire had begun to rear.

Something whistled. Bostil saw the leap of Slone's lasso—the curling, snaky dart of the noose which flew up to snap around Sears. The rope sung taut. Sears was swept bodily clean from the saddle, to hit the ground in sodden impact.

Almost swifter than Bostil's sight was the action of Slone—flashing by—in the air—himself on the plunging horse. Sears shot once, twice. Then Wildfire bolted as his rider whipped the lasso round the horn. Sears, half rising, was jerked ten feet. An awful shriek was throttled in his throat.

A streak of dust on the slope—a tearing, parting line in the sage!

Bostil stood amazed. The red stallion made short plunges. Slone reached low for the tripping reins. When he straightened up in the saddle Wildfire broke wildly into a run.

"Dick Sears's finish! Roped by a boy rider!" exclaimed Cal Blinn fervidly.

"Thet was the quickest trick I ever seen," declared Macomber.

They watched Wildfire run down the slope, out into the valley, with a streak of rising dust out behind. They all saw when there ceased to be that peculiar rising of dust. Wildfire appeared to shoot ahead at greater speed. Then he slowed up. The rider turned him and faced back toward the group, coming at a stiff gallop. Soon Wildfire breasted the slope, and halted, snorting, shaking before the men. The lasso was still trailing out behind, limp and sagging. There was no weight upon it now.

Bostil strode slowly ahead. He sympathized with the tension that held Slone; he knew why the lean, strong hands, slowly taking up the lasso, now shook like leaves in the wind.

Bostil put a hand on the red stallion—patted his shoulder. Then he gripped Slone close and hard. Then he again faced his comrades.

"Fellers, do you think Cordts was in on thet trick?" he queried.

"Nope. Cordts was on the square," replied Holley. "But he must have seen it comin' an' left Sears to his fate. It sure was a fittin' last ride for a hoss thief."

Bostil sent Holley and Farlane on ahead to find Cordts and Hutchinson, with their comrades, to tell them the fate of Sears, and to warn them to leave before the news got to the riders.

When Bostil and his guests arrived at the corrals, Holley, with Farlane

and other riders, were waiting.

"Boss," said Holley, "Cordts an' his outfit never rid in. They was last seen by some Navajos headin' for the canyons."

Wildfire would not go into the barn, and Slone led him into one of the high-barred corrals. Bostil waited, talking with his friends, until Slone returned, and then they went toward the house.

Bostil halted at the door and whispered, huskily, "Let's keep the women from learnin' about Sears—tonight, anyway."

Then he led the way through the big door into the huge living-room. There were hanging-lights on the walls and blazing sticks on the hearth. Lucy came running in to meet them, dressed in her best white dress.

Lucy greeted Slone as she had the others. Slone met her with awkward restraint.

"What—what has happened?" she asked.

"Why, nothin'," replied Slone slowly, "'cept I'm fagged out."

Lucy flashed a look from Slone to her father.

"Wal, Lucy dear," replied Bostil, "nothin' came off thet'd make you feel bad. Young Slone had a scare about his hoss. Wildfire's safe out there in the corral, an' he'll be guarded like the King an' Sarch. Slone needs a drink an' somethin' to eat, same as all of us."

Lucy's color returned and her smile, but Bostil noted that, while she was serving them and brightly responsive to compliments, she gave more than one steady glance at Slone. She was deep, thought Bostil, and it angered him a little that she showed interest in what concerned this strange rider.

Then they had dinner, with 12 at table. The wives of Bostil's three friends had been helping Aunt Jane prepare the feast, and they added to the merriment. Bostil was not much given to social intercourse—he would have preferred to be with his horses and riders—but this night he outdid himself as host, amazed his sister Jane, who evidently thought he drank too much, and delighted Lucy.

After dinner Bostil with the men went down to Brackton's, where Slone and the winners of the day received their prizes.

"Why, it's more money than I ever had in my whole life!" exclaimed Slone, gazing incredulously at the gold.

Bostil was amused and pleased. "Slone, I seen you didn't drink none," he said curiously.

"No; I don't like liquor."

"Do you gamble?"

"I like a little bet—on a race," replied Slone frankly.

"Slone, how'd you like to ride for me?"

Slone appeared surprised. "Why, I never rode for anyone," he replied slowly. "I can't stand to be tied down. I'm a horse hunter, you know."

"Sure, I know. But thet doesn't make no difference," went on Bostil persuasively. "If we got along—wal, you'd save some of thet yellow coin you're jinglin'. A roamin' rider never builds no corral!"

"Thank you, Bostil," replied Slone earnestly. "I'll think it over. It would seem kind of tame now to go back to wild-horse wranglin', after I've caught Wildfire."

Slone appeared embarrassed and kept studying the gold coins in his palm. Someone touched Bostil, who, turning, saw Brackton at his elbow.

"Come now while I've got a minnit,"

said Brackton, taking up a lantern. "I've somethin' to show you."

Bostil followed Brackton, and Slone came along. The old man opened a door into a small room, half full of stores and truck. The lantern only dimly lighted the place.

"Look thar!" And Brackton flashed the light upon a man lying prostrate.

Bostil recognized the pale face of Joel Creech. "Brack! Is he dead?"

"Nope, he ain't dead, which if he was might be good for this community," replied Brackton. "He's only fallen in a fit. Fust off I reckoned he was drunk. But it ain't thet."

"Wal, what do you want to show him to me for?" demanded Bostil gruffly.

"I reckoned you oughter see him."

"An' why, Brackton?"

Brackton set down the lantern and, pushing Slone outside, said, "Jest a minnit, son," and then closed the door.

"Joel's been on my hands since the flood cut him off from home," said Brackton. "An' he's been some trial. He cried like a baby thet had lost its mother. Then he gets wild-lookin' an' raved around. Once he said, 'My dad's hosses are goin' to starve, an' I'm goin' to kill somebody!' He was out of his head an' dangerous. Wal, I was worried some, but all I could do was lock up my guns.

"Last night I caught him confabin' with some men out in the dark, behind the store. They all skedaddled except Joel, but I recognized Cordts. I didn't like this, nuther. Joel was surly an' ugly. An' when one of the riders called him he said, 'Thet boat *never drifted off*. An' if my dad's hosses starve I'm goin' to kill somebody!' "

Brackton took up the lantern and placed a hand on the door ready to go out.

"Then a rider punched Joel—I never seen who—an' Joel had a fit. I dragged him in here. An' as you see, he ain't come to yet."

"Wal, Brackton, the boy's crazy."

"So I reckon. An' I'm afeared he'll burn us out—he's crazy on fires, anyway—or do somethin' like."

"He's sure a problem. Wal, we'll see," replied Bostil, soberly.

And they went out to find Slone waiting. Then Bostil called his guests, and with Slone also accompanying him, went home.

Bostil threw off the recurring gloom, and he was good-natured when Lucy came to his room to say good night.

"Hello, daughter!" he said. "Aren't you ashamed to come facin' your poor old dad?"

Lucy eyed him dubiously. "I thought it would be fun to surprise you all. Then, it was my great and only chance to get out in front of the King. Oh, how grand it'd have been! Dad, I'd have run away from him the same as the others!"

"No, you wouldn't," declared Bostil.

"Dad, Wildfire can beat the King!"

"Never, girl! Knockin' a good-tempered hoss off his pins ain't beatin' him in a runnin'-race."

Then father and daughter fought over the old score, the one doggedly, imperturbably, the other spiritedly, with flashing eyes. It was different this time, however, for it ended in Lucy saying Bostil would never risk another race. That stung Bostil, and it cost him an effort to control his temper.

"Let thet go now. Tell me—all about how you saved Wildfire, an' Slone, too."

Lucy readily told the whole story.

"Lucy, you're sure a game kid," he said fervidly, when she had ended. "I reckon I don't blame Slone for fallin' in love with you."

"Who said *that!*" inquired Lucy.

"Nobody. But it's true—ain't it?"

"Yes, Dad—it's—it's true," she answered haltingly.

"Wal, you didn't need to tell me, but I'm glad you did." He took to his old habit of teasing. "Another moonstruck rider!" he said. "I'd be ashamed to trifle with these poor fellers."

"Dad!"

"You're a heartless flirt—same as your mother was before she met *me*."

"I'm not. And I don't believe mother was, either," replied Lucy. It was easy to strike fire from her.

"Wal, you did dead wrong to ride out there day after day meetin' Slone, because—young woman—if he ever has the nerve to ask me for you I'll beat him up bad."

"Then you'd be a brute!" retorted Lucy.

"Wal, mebbe," returned Bostil, "but I can't stand for the nerve of thet."

"He—he means to—to ask you."

"A-huh!"

Lucy was flushing now. "He said he'd never have let me meet him out there alone—unless—he—he loved me—and as our neighbors and the riders would learn of it—and talk—he wanted you and them to know he'd asked to—to marry me."

"Wal, he's a square young man!" ejaculated Bostil. "Thet'll make me treat him decent, so when he rides up to ask for you I'll let him off with 'No!' "

"Dad—I said—'No'—for myself," she murmured.

"So he's asked you, then? Wal, wal! When?"

"Today—out there in the rocks where he waited with Wildfire for me. He—he—"

Lucy slipped into her father's arms, and her slender form shook. His heart softened and he clasped her close.

"Wal, little girl, tell me," he said.

"He—he broke his word to me."

"A-huh! Thet's too bad. An' how did he?"

"He—he—" Lucy seemed to catch her tongue and she sat in silence.

Then she looked up, self-possessed again. "Days ago I told him I cared for him," she went on. "But I forbade him to speak of it to me. He promised. I wanted to wait till after the race—till after I had found courage to confess to you. He broke his word. Today when he put me up on Wildfire he—he suddenly lost his head.

"He—he pulled me off—he hugged me—he k-kissed me. Oh, it was dreadful—shameful! Then I gave him back—some—something he had given me. And I told him I—I hated him—and I told him, 'No!' "

"But you rode his hoss in the race," said Bostil.

Lucy bowed her head at that. "I—I couldn't resist!"

Bostil stroked the bright head. "Wal, it seems to me Slone didn't act so bad, considerin'. You'd told him you cared for him."

"I'll never forgive him," Lucy cried passionately. "I hate him. A man who breaks his word in one thing will do it in another."

"Wal, listen. I'm bound to confess your new rider is sure swift. An', Lucy, today if he hadn't been as swift with a rope as he is in love—wal, your old daddy might be dead!"

She grew as white as her dress. "Oh, Dad! I *knew* something had happen-

ed," she cried, reaching for him.

Then Bostil told her how Dick Sears had menaced him—how Slone had foiled the horse thief. He told the story bluntly, but eloquently, with all a rider's praise.

Then Lucy kissed him and without a word fled from the room.

Bostil stared after her. "Damn me!" he swore, as he threw a boot against the wall. "I reckon I'll never let her marry Slone, but I just had to tell her what I think of him!"

Chapter Fourteen

Slone's Purchase

SLONE lay wide awake under an open window, watching the stars glimmer through the rustling foliage of the tall cottonwoods. Somewhere a lonesome hound bayed. Very faintly came the silvery tinkle of running water.

For five days Slone had been a guest of Bostil's, and the whole five days had been torment.

On the morning of the day after the races Lucy had confronted him. Would he ever forget her eyes—her voice? "Bless you for saving my dad!" she had said. "It was brave. But don't let Dad fool you. Don't believe in his kindness. Above all, don't ride for him! He only wants Wildfire, and if he doesn't get him he'll hate you!"

That speech of Lucy's had made the succeeding days hard for Slone. Bostil loaded him with gifts and kindnesses, and never ceased importuning him to accept his offers. But for Lucy, Slone would have accepted.

The great stallion that Slone had nearly sacrificed his life to catch was like a thorn in the rider's flesh. Slone lay there in the darkness, restless, hot, rolling from side to side, or staring out at the star-studded sky—miserably unhappy all on account of that horse.

How he had gloried in the gift of the stallion to Lucy! Then, on the morning of the race had come that unexpected, incomprehensible, wild act of which he had been guilty. He had kept his word to Lucy, when day after day he had burned with love until that fatal moment when the touch of her, as he lifted her to Wildfire's saddle, had made a madman out of him. He had swept her into his arms and held her breast to his, her face before him, and he had kissed the sweet, parting lips till he was blind.

Then he had learned what a little fury she was. She did not know that his act had been ungovernable and that he had not known what he was doing till too late. And she had finished with: "I'll ride Wildfire in the race—but I won't have him—and I won't have *you! No!*"

Upon the sixth morning of his stay at Bostil's Slone rose with something of his former will reasserting itself. He could not remain in Bostil's home any longer unless he accepted Bostil's offer, and this was not to be thought of.

Bostil was in the corral with Wildfire. This was the second time Slone had found him there.

"I like your hoss," said Bostil with gruff frankness.

"Bostil, I'm sorry I can't take you up on the job," rejoined Slone swiftly.

"Why can't you?" demanded Bostil.

"I can't ride for you," replied Slone briefly.

"Anythin' to do with Lucy?" queried Bostil.

"How so?" returned Slone.

"Wal, you was sweet on her an' she wouldn't have you," replied Bostil.

"Yes, I *am* sweet on Lucy, an' she won't have me," said Slone steadily. "I asked her to let me come to you an' tell you I wanted to marry her. But she wouldn't."

"Wal, it's just as good you didn't come, because I might—" Bostil broke off his speech and began again. "You don't lack nerve, Slone. What'd you have to offer Lucy?"

"Nothin' except— But that doesn't matter," replied Slone, cut to the quick by Bostil's scorn. "I'm glad you know, an' so much for that."

Bostil turned to look at Wildfire once more, and he looked long. When he faced around again he was another man.

"Slone, I'll give you pick of a hundred mustangs an' a thousand dollars for Wildfire!"

"No," said Slone.

"I'll double it," returned Bostil.

"No!"

"I'll—"

"Save your breath, Bostil," flashed Slone. "You don't know me. But let me tell you—you *can't buy* my horse!"

The great veins swelled and churned in Bostil's bull neck; a thick and ugly contortion worked in his face; his eyes reflected a sick rage.

Slone went into another corral for his other horse, Nagger, and, bringing him out, returned to find Bostil had followed as far as the court. The old man's rage apparently had passed or had been smothered.

"See here," he began, in thick voice, "don't be a damn fool an' ruin your chance in life. I'll—"

"Bostil, my one chance was ruined —an' you know who did it," replied Slone, as he gathered Nagger's rope and Wildfire's bridle together. "I've no hard feelin's, but I can't sell you my horse. An' I can't ride for you—because—well, because it would breed trouble."

"An' what kind?" queried Bostil.

Holley and Farlane and Van, with several other riders, had come up and were standing open-mouthed.

"We'd be racin' the King an' Wildfire, wouldn't we?" replied Slone.

"An' supposin' we would?" returned Bostil ominously.

"Wildfire would run off with your favorite—an' you wouldn't like that," answered Slone.

"You wild-hoss chaser," roared Bostil, "your Wildfire may be a bloody killer, but he can't beat the King in a race!"

"Excuse *me*, Bostil, but Wildfire did beat the King!"

"You're a liar!" declared Bostil, with a tremendous stride forward. Slone saw then how dangerous the man really was. "It was no race. Your wild hoss knocked the King off the track."

"Sage King had the lead, didn't he? Why didn't he keep it?"

Bostil burst out into a torrent of incoherent speech. When Bostil got out of breath Slone said:

"We're both wastin' talk. An' I'm not wantin' you to call me a liar twice. Put your rider up on the King an' come on, right now. I'll—"

"Slone, shut up an' chase yourself," interrupted Holley.

"You go to hell!" returned Slone coolly.

There was a moment's silence, in which Slone took Holley's measure.

"What am I up against here?" demanded Slone. "Am I goin' to be shot

because I'm takin' my own part? Holley, you an' the rest of your pards are all afraid of this old devil. But I'm not—an' you stay out of this."

"Wal, son, you needn't get r'iled," replied Holley placatingly. "I was only tryin' to stave off talk you might be sorry for."

"Sorry for nothin'! I'm goin' to make him race the King or take water!" Then Slone turned to Bostil. "Come on! Fetch the King! Let your own riders judge the race!"

Bostil struggled both to control himself and to speak. "Naw! I ain't goin' to see thet red hoss-killer jump the King again!"

"Bah! you're afraid. You know there'd be no girl on his back. You know he can outrun the King, an' that's why you want to buy him."

Slone caught his breath then. He realized suddenly, at Bostil's paling face, that perhaps he had dared too much.

"I'll go now, Bostil."

Slone nodded a good-by to the riders, and, turning away, he led the two horses down the lane toward the house. It scarcely needed sight of Lucy under the cottonwoods to still his anger and rouse his regret. Lucy saw him coming, and, as usual, started to avoid meeting him, when sight of the horses, or something else, caused her to come toward him instead.

Slone halted. "Lucy, I've done it now—played hob, sure."

"What do you mean?" she cried.

Then Slone began to relate everything that had been said, and before he concluded his story his heart gave a wild throb at the telltale face and eyes of the girl.

"You said that to Dad!" she cried in amazement and fear and admiration. "Oh, Dad richly deserved it! But I wish you hadn't. Oh, I wish you hadn't!"

"Why?" asked Slone.

But she did not answer that. "Where are you going?" she questioned.

"Come to think of that, I don't know," replied Slone, blankly. "I started back to fetch my things out of my room. That's as far as my muddled thoughts got."

"Your things? Oh! You mean to—to go away—for good?"

"Sure. What else can I do?"

"Lin! Oh, there comes Dad! He mustn't see me. I must run— Lin, don't leave Bostil's Ford—don't go—*don't!*"

Then she flew round the corner of the house, to disappear. Slone stood there transfixed and thrilling. Even Bostil's heavy tread did not break the trance, and a meeting would have been unavoidable had not Bostil turned down the path that led to the back of the house.

Slone hurried into the little room that had been his and gathered up his few belongings. He was careful to leave behind the gifts of guns, blankets, gloves, and other rider's belongings which Bostil had presented to him. Thus laden, he went outside and led the horses down into the village.

Slone went down to Brackton's, and put the horses into a large, high-fenced pasture adjoining Brackton's house. Slone felt reasonably sure his horses would be safe there, but he meant to keep a close watch on them.

Later in the morning Slone engaged in conversation with a man who said his name was Vorhees. It developed soon that Vorhees owned a little house, a corral, and a patch of ground on a likely site up under the bluff, and he was anxious to sell cheap because he had a fine opportunity at Durango,

where his people lived. What interested Slone most was the man's remark that he had a corral which could not be broken into.

He went up to Vorhees's place and was much pleased with everything, especially the corral, which had been built by a man who feared horse thieves as much as Bostil. The view from the door of the little cabin was magnificent beyond compare.

"Vorhees, are you serious?" he asked. "The money you ask is little enough."

"It's enough an' to spare," replied the man. "An' I'd take it as a favor of you."

"Well, I'll go you," said Slone, and he laughed a little irrationally. "Only you needn't tell right away that I bought you out."

The deal was consummated, leaving Slone still with half of the money that had been his prize in the race. He felt elated. After he drank out of the spring that bubbled from under the bluff he told himself it alone was worth the money.

"Looks right down on Bostil's place," Slone soliloquized with glee. "Won't he just be mad! An' Lucy! Whatever's she goin' to think?"

When he returned to Brackton's he was in an exultant mood. The old storekeeper gave him a nudge and pointed to a young man of ragged aspect sitting gloomily on a box. Slone recognized Joel Creech.

"Say," he said impulsively, "want to help me carry some grub an' stuff?"

"Howdy!" replied Creech, raising his head. "Sure do."

Slone purchased a bill of goods from Brackton, and, with Creech helping, carried it up to the cabin under the bluff. Three trips were needed to pack up all the supplies, and meanwhile Creech had but few words to say, and these of no moment. Slone offered him money, which he refused.

"I'll help you fix up, an' eat a bite," he said. "Nice up hyar."

He seemed rational enough and certainly responded to kindness. Slone found that Vorhees had left the cabin so clean there was little cleaning to do. An open fireplace of stone required some repair and there was wood to cut.

"Joel, you start a fire while I go down after my horses," said Slone.

Young Creech nodded and Slone left him there. It was not easy to catch Wildfire, nor any easier to get him into the new corral; but at last Slone saw him safely there. Creech was standing in the doorway, watching the horses.

"Grand wild hoss! He did what Blue was a-goin' to do—beat thet there damned Bostil's King!"

Creech wagged his head. Slone pitied him the more, but wished to see the last of him. Creech stayed on, however, and grew stranger and more talkative during the meal. He repeated things often—talked disconnectedly, and gave other indications that he was not wholly right in his mind. Slone, wanting to learn all he could, encouraged Creech to talk about his father and the

racers and the river and boat, and finally Bostil.

Slone became convinced that, whether young Creech was half crazy or not, he knew his father's horses were doomed, and that the boat at the ferry had been cut adrift. Slone could not understand why he was convinced, but he was. Finally Creech told how he had gone down to the river only a day before; how he had found the flood still raging, but much lower; how he had worked round the cliffs and had pulled up the rope cables to find they had been cut.

"You see, Bostil cut them when he didn't need to," continued Creech shrewdly. "But he didn't know the flood was comin' down so quick. He was afeared we'd come across an' git the boat thet night. An' he meant to take away them cut cables. But he hadn't no time."

"Bostil?" queried Slone, as he gazed hard at Creech.

Slone's query served to send Creech off on another tangent which wound up in dark, mysterious threats. Then Slone caught the name of Lucy.

"What's the girl got to do with it?" he demanded angrily. "If you want to talk to me don't use her name."

"I'll use her name when I want," shouted Creech.

"Not to me!"

"Yes, to you, mister. I ain't carin' a damn fer you!"

"You crazy loon!" exclaimed Slone, with impatience and disgust added to anger.

Creech crouched low. "Crazy, am I?" he yelled. "Mebbe not damn crazy! I kin tell you're gone on Lucy Bostil! I seen you with her out there in the rocks the mornin' of the race. I seen what you did to her. An' I'm a-goin' to tell it! An' I'm a-goin' to ketch Lucy Bostil an' strip her naked, an' when I git through with her I'll tie her on a hoss an' fire the grass! By Gawd! I am!"

"Crazy or not, here goes!" muttered Slone grimly, and, leaping up, with one blow he knocked Creech half out of the door, and then kicked him the rest of the way.

Creech got up and ran down the path, turning twice on the way. Then he disappeared among the trees.

Several days slipped by with Slone scarcely realizing how they flew. Unaccustomed labor tired him so that he went to bed early and slept like a log. If it had not been for the ever-present worry and suspense and longing, in regard to Lucy, he would have been happier than ever he could remember. Many times he caught himself watching with eager eyes for a glimpse of Lucy Bostil down there among the cottonwoods. Still, he never saw her.

One morning Slone had a visitor—old Brackton.

"Howdy, Slone! I jest wanted to see what you was doin' up hyar," he said.

Slone spread his hands and explained in few words.

"So you took over the place, hey? We all figgered thet. But Vorhees was mum. Fact is, he was sure mysterious." Brackton sat down and eyed Slone with interest. "Folks are talkin' a lot about you," he said bluntly.

"Is that so?"

"You 'pear to be a pretty mysterious kind of a feller, Slone. I kind of took a shine to you at first, an' thet's why I come up hyar to tell you it'd be wise fer you to vamoose."

"What!" exclaimed Slone.

"What'd you beat up thet poor Joel

Creech fer?" demanded Brackton.

"He got what he deserved," replied Slone.

"Wal, Joel tells some queer things about you--fer instance, how you took advantage of little Lucy Bostil, grabbin' her an' maulin' her the way Joel seen you."

"Damn the loon!" muttered Slone, rising to pace the path.

"Joel's down at my house. He had fits after you beat him, an' he ain't got over them yet. But he could blab to the riders. Van Sickle's lookin' fer you. An' today when I was alone with Joel he told me some more queer things about you."

"What more did the fool say?"

"Where was you the night of the flood?"

"If it's any of your mix, I was out on the slope among the rocks. I heard that flood comin' down long before it got here," replied Slone deliberately.

Brackon averted his gaze, and abruptly rose as if the occasion was ended. "Wal, take my hunch an' leave!" he said, turning away.

"Brackton, if you mean well, I'm much obliged," returned Slone slowly, ponderingly. "But I'll not take the hunch."

"Suit yourself," added Brackton coldly, and he went away.

Slone tried to laugh off the interview, but it persisted and worried him all day. After supper he decided to walk down into the village, and would have done so but for the fact that he saw a man climbing his path. When he recognized the rider Holley he sensed trouble.

"Howdy, son!" was the rider's drawled remark. "Sure makes--me--puff to climb--up this mountain."

"Hello, Holley! How are you?" Slone replied. "Have a seat."

"Wal, I'm right spry fer an old bird. But I can't climb wuth a damn-- Say, this here beats Bostil's view."

"Yes, it's fine," replied Slone rather awkwardly, as he sat down on the porch step.

"Slone, you ain't holdin' it ag'in' me --thet I tried to shut you up the other day?" he drawled.

"Why, no, Holley, I'm not. I saw your point. You were right. But Bostil made me mad."

"You got yourself in bad right off, fer Bostil has turned the riders ag'in' you, an' this here punchin' of Creech has turned the village folks ag'in' you."

Slone hesitated.

"Wal, I reckon I'd better tell you," drawled Holley, "thet Lucy wants to know *if* you beat up Joel an' *why* you did."

"Holley! Did she ask you to find out?"

"She sure did. What Creech swears he seen you do to Miss Lucy, out there among the rocks, where you was hid with Wildfire--is there any truth in thet?" asked Holley earnestly. "I'm figgerin' thet you punched Joel because he throwed it in your face."

"He did, an' I lambasted him," replied Slone, with force.

"You did right. But what I want to know, is it true what Joel seen?"

"It's true, Holley. But what I did isn't so bad--so bad as he'd make it look."

"Wal, I knowed thet. I knowed fer a long time how Lucy cares fer you," returned the old rider, kindly.

Slone raised his head swiftly, incredulously. "Holley! You can't be serious."

"Wal, I am. I've been sort of a big brother to Lucy Bostil for eighteen

years. I know her better'n anybody. An' lately she's been different. She's worried an' unhappy."

"But Holley, all that—it doesn't seem—"

"I reckon not," went on Holley, as Slone halted. "I think she cares fer you. An' I'm your friend, Slone."

"Thanks—Holley," replied Slone unsteadily.

"Lucy will hear what Joel Creech is tellin'. Van Sickle swears he's a-goin' to tell her an' then beat you up with a quirt."

"He is, is he?" snapped Slone, darkly.

"I've a hunch Lucy's guessed why you punched Joel. But she wants to know fer sure. Now, Slone, I'll tell her why."

"It all scares me," said Slone. "Holley, I love the girl. So I—I didn't insult her. Bostil will never understand. An' what's he goin' to do when he finds out?"

"Wal, leave your gun home, an' fight Bostil. You're pretty husky. Sure he'll lick you, but mebbe you could give the old cuss a black eye." Holley laughed as if the idea gave him infinite pleasure.

"Fight Bostil? Lucy would hate me!"

"Nix! You don't know thet kid. If the old man goes after you Lucy'll care more fer you. She's jest like him in some ways." Holley pulled out a stubby black pipe and, filling and lighting it, he appeared to grow more thoughtful. "It wasn't only Lucy thet sent me up here to see you. Bostil had been pesterin' me fer days. But I kept fightin' shy of it till Lucy got hold of me."

"Bostil sent you? Why?"

"Reckon you can guess. He can't sleep, thinkin' about your red hoss. Bostil hasn't given up hope of gittin' Wildfire. An', Slone, you're sure wise, ain't you, thet if Bostil doesn't buy him you can't stay on here?"

"I'm wise. But I won't sell Wildfire," replied Slone doggedly. "Wildfire's not mine to sell. He's Lucy's!"

"The devil you say!" ejaculated Holley, and he nearly dropped his pipe.

"I gave Wildfire to her. She accepted him. It was *done*. Then—then I lost my head an' made her mad. An'—she said she'd ride him in the race, but wouldn't keep him. But he *is* hers."

"Oho! I see."

"If I go away from here an' leave Wildfire for Lucy—do you think she could keep him? Wouldn't Bostil take him from her?"

"Wal, son, if he tried thet on Lucy she'd jump Wildfire an' hit your trail an' hang on to it till she found you."

"Holley, all this is—is good of you," said Slone. "I—I'll—"

"Shut up, son," interrupted the rider dryly. "Thet's your only weakness, so far as I can see. You say too much."

Holley started down then, his long, clinking spurs digging into the steep path.

Next day Slone worked hard all day, looking forward to nightfall, expecting that Holley would come up. He tried to resist the sweet and tantalizing anticipation of a message from Lucy, but in vain. But Holley did not come, and Slone went to bed late, half sick with disappointment.

The next day was worse. Slone found work irksome, yet he held to it. On the third day he rested and dreamed, and grew doubtful again, and then moody. On the fourth day Slone found he needed supplies that he must obtain from the store.

There were horses standing, bridles down, before Brackton's place, and rid-

ers lounging at the rail and step. Some of these men had been pleasant to Slone on earlier occasions. This day they seemed not to see him.

Just inside the door Slone encountered Wetherby, the young rancher from Durango. Slone spoke, but Wetherby only replied with an insolent stare. Slone did not glance at the man to whom Wetherby was talking. Only a few people were inside the store, and Brackton was waiting upon them.

Presently Brackton was at leisure, but he showed no disposition to attend to Slone's wants. Then Slone walked up to the counter and asked for supplies.

"Have you got the money?" asked Brackton, as if addressing one he would not trust.

"Yes," replied Slone, growing red under an insult that he knew Wetherby had heard.

Brackton handed out the supplies and received the money, without a word. He held his head down.

Slone, outraged, hurried out of the place, and in his hurry he bumped square into a burly form. Slone recoiled—looked up. Bostil! The old rider was eying him with cool speculation.

"Wal, are you drunk?" he queried.

"Bostil, you know I don't drink."

"A-huh! I know a lot about you, Slone. I heard you bought Vorhees's place, up on the bench."

"Yes."

"Did he tell you it was mortgaged to me for more'n it's worth?"

"No, he didn't."

"Did he make over any papers to you?"

"No."

"Wal, if it interests you I'll show you papers thet proves the property's mine."

"All right, Bostil. If it's yours—it's yours," he said, calmly enough.

"I reckon I'd drove you out before this if I hadn't felt we could make a deal."

"We can't agree on any deal, Bostil," replied Slone steadily.

"Why can't we?" demanded Bostil. "If you wasn't so touchy we could. An' let me say, young feller, thet there's more reason now thet you *do* make a deal with me."

"Deal? What about?"

"About your red hoss."

"Wildfire! No deals, Bostil."

"Mebbe I can tell you somethin' thet'll make you sell Wildfire," said Bostil.

"Not if you talked yourself dumb!" flashed Slone. "I'll race Wildfire against the King. But no more."

"Race! Wal, we don't run races around here without stakes. You brag of racin' with me—an' you a beggarly rider! You wouldn't have them clothes an' boots if my girl hadn't fetched them to you."

The riders behind Bostil laughed.

"Yes, Bostil, I'm what you say," responded Slone, and his voice seemed to fill his ears. "But you're dead wrong when you say I've nothin' to bet on a race."

"An' what'll you bet?"

"My life an' my horse!"

Bostil turned white. "Ag'in' what?" he demanded hoarsely.

"*Your daughter Lucy!*"

One instant the surprise held Bostil mute and motionless. Then his huge bulk jerked into motion and he bellowed like a mad bull.

Slone saw the blow coming, made no move to avoid it. The big fist took him square on the mouth and chin and laid him flat on the ground. Sight failed

Slone for a little, and likewise ability to move. But he did not lose consciousness. He started to get up, his brain in a whirl. Where was his gun? He had left it at home. But for that he would have killed Bostil. He had already killed one man. He could do it again. But Bostil was Lucy's father!

Slone gathered up the packages of supplies, and without looking at the men he hurried away. When he reached the cabin he shut himself in, and lay on his bunk. It was dark before he composed himself and went out to take grass and water to the horses. When he returned to the cabin a man was standing at the porch. Slone recognized Holley's shape and then his voice.

"Son, you raised the devil today."

"Holley, don't you go back on me!" cried Slone. "I was driven!"

"Don't talk so loud," whispered the rider in return. "I've only a minnit. Here—a letter from Lucy— An', son, don't git the idee thet I'll go back on you."

Slone took the letter with trembling fingers.

"Son, I'm double-crossin' the boss, right this minnit!" whispered Holley hoarsely. "An' the same time I'm playin' Lucy's game. If Bostil finds out he'll kill me. I mustn't be ketched up here. But I won't lose track of you—wherever you go."

Holley slipped away stealthily in the dusk, leaving Slone with a throbbing heart.

The letter was short, written in lead pencil on the torn leaf of a ledger. Slone could not read rapidly—those years on the desert had seen to that—and his haste to learn what Lucy said bewildered him. At first all the words blurred:

Come at once to the bench in the cottonwoods. I'll meet you there. My heart is breaking. It's a lie—a lie—what they say. I'll swear you were with me the night the boat was cut adrift. I know you didn't do that. Oh, come! I will stick to you. I will run off with you. I love you!

Chapter Fifteen

In the Cottonwoods

HE PUT the precious letter inside his blouse, buckled on his gun belt, and, extinguishing the light, he hurried out.

A crescent moon had just tipped the bluff. The village lanes and cabins and trees lay silver in the moonlight.

Slone kept under the dark lee of the bluff and worked around so that he could be above the village, where there was little danger of meeting any one. Yet presently he had to go out of the shadow into the moon-blanched lane. Swift and silent he went along, keeping in the shade of what trees there were, until he came to the grove of cottonwoods. He slipped in among the trees, halting every few steps to listen.

He found the narrow path, its white crossed by slowly moving black bars of shadow, and stealthily he followed this, keen of eye and ear, stopping at every rustle. He well knew the bench Lucy had mentioned. It was in a remote corner of the grove, under big trees near the spring. At last he crossed the runway from the spring, smelled the cool, wet moss and watercress, and saw the big cottonwood, looming dark above the other trees.

Then a white, slender shape flashed from beside the black tree trunk and flew toward him. Lucy leaped into his arms.

"Lin! Lin! Oh, I'm so–so glad to see you!" she whispered. "I know everything–what they accuse you of–how the riders treated you–how my dad struck you. Oh! He's a brute! I hate him for that."

"Lucy, never mind," whispered Slone. "I'd stood to be shot just for this."

He felt her hands softly on his face, feeling around tenderly till they found the swollen bruise on mouth and chin.

"Ah! He struck you. And I–I'll kiss you," she whispered. "If kisses will make it well–it'll be well!"

She lifted her face and kissed him softly again and again and again, till the touch that had been exquisitely painful to his bruised lips became rapture. Then she leaped back in his arms, her hands on his shoulders, white-faced, dark-eyed, and laughed up in his face, lovingly, daringly, as if she defied the world to change what she had done.

"Come in the shade," he whispered, and with his arm round her he led her to the great tree trunk. "Is it safe for you here? An' how long can you stay?"

"I had it out with Dad–left him licked once in his life," she replied. "Then I went to my room, fastened the door, and slipped out of my window. I can stay out as long as I want. No one will know."

Slone's heart throbbed. She was his.

"Tell me, then," he began quietly, "tell me what's come off."

"Don't you know?" she queried, in amazement.

"Only that for some reason I'm done in Bostil's Ford. It can't be because I punched Joel Creech."

"But, Lin, there's more. Oh, I hate to tell you!" she whispered passionately. "I thought you'd know– Joel Creech swore you cut the ropes on the ferryboat and sent it adrift."

"The loon!" ejaculated Slone, and he laughed low in both anger and ridicule. "Lucy, that's only a fool's talk."

"Lin, the folks here are queer," she resumed, more calmly. "Brackton believed him. Van believed him. They told my father. And he–my dad–God forgive him! he jumped at that. The village as one person now believes you sent the boat adrift so Creech's horses could not cross and you could win the race."

"Lucy, if it wasn't so–so funny I'd be mad as–as–" burst out Slone.

"It isn't funny. It's terrible. I know who cut those cables– Holley knows– *Dad* knows–and, oh, Lin–"

"Listen, dear," he entreated, "your father's a good man. I understand him. I feel sorry for him. An' if he's throwed the blame on me, all right. I'll stand it. But if they knew your–your father did it, an' if Creech's horses starve, why it'd be a disgrace for him–an' you."

"Lin Slone – you will accept the blame!" she whispered.

"Sure I will," replied Slone. "I can't be any worse off."

"Lin, you make me love you so–it–it hurts!" And she seemed about to fling herself into his arms again. "But you'll not take the shame of that act. For I won't let you. I'll tell my father I was with you when the boat was cut loose. He'll believe me."

"Yes, an' he'll *kill* me!" groaned Slone. "Good Lord! Lucy, don't do that!"

"I will! An' he'll not kill you. Lin,

Dad took a great fancy to you. I know that. He thinks he hates you. But in his heart he doesn't. If he got hold of Wildfire—why, he'd never be able to do enough for you."

"Lucy, if I'm ever unlucky enough to meet Bostil again I'll be deaf an' dumb. An' now you promise me you won't tell him you were with me that night."

"Then—what on earth can—we do?" Lucy said.

"I think we must wait. You wrote in your letter you'd stick to me—you'd—" He could not get the words out, the thought so overcame him.

"If it comes to a finish, I'll go with you," Lucy returned, with passion rising again.

"Lucy! You love me—that well?"

Then their lips met again and their hands locked, and they stood silent, straining toward each other.

"We'll run—then—if it comes to a finish," said Slone huskily. "But I'll wait. I'll stick it out here. I'll take what comes. So—maybe I'll not disgrace you more."

"I told Van I—I gloried in being hugged by you that day," she replied, and her little defiant laugh told what she thought of the alleged disgrace.

"What do you mean?"

"I was surprised when you grabbed me off Wildfire. And my heart beat—beat—beat so when you hugged me. And when you kissed me I—I was petrified. I knew I liked it then—and I was furious with myself."

Slone drew a long, deep breath of utter enchantment. "You'll take back Wildfire?"

"I will. But no one must know that yet."

They drew apart then.

"An' now you must go," said Slone reluctantly. "Listen. I forgot to warn you about Joel Creech. Don't ever let him near you. He's crazy an' he means evil."

"Oh, I know, Lin! I'll watch. But I'm not afraid of him."

"I'm afraid," said Slone nervously. "There's Creech an' Cordts—both have threatened you."

"I'm afraid of Cordts," replied Lucy with a shiver. "But Dad says I'm never in any danger if I watch out. And I do. Who could catch me on Sarch?"

"You'll be watchful—careful," he said earnestly.

"Oh, Lin, you need to be that more than I. What will you do?"

"I'll stay up at the little cabin I thought I owned till today. An' when will I see you again?"

"Here, every night. Wait till I come," she replied. "Good night, Lin."

He kissed her good-by and watched the slight form glide away, flit to and fro, white in the dark patches, grow indistinct and vanish.

The next day he tried to work, but found idle waiting made the time fly swifter because in it he could dream. In the dark of the rustling cottonwoods he met Lucy, as eager to see him as he was to see her.

That night he learned that Bostil had started for Durango with some of his riders. This trip surprised Slone and relieved him likewise, for Durango was over 200 miles distant, and a journey there even for the hard riders was a matter of days.

"He left no orders for me," Lucy said, "except to behave myself. Is this behaving?" she whispered, and nestled close to Slone, audacious, tormenting as she had been before this dark cloud of trouble. "But he left orders for Holley to ride with me and look after me.

Isn't that funny? Poor old Holley! He hates to double-cross Dad, he says."

"I'm glad Holley's to look after you," replied Slone. "Yesterday I saw you tearin' down into the sage on Sarch."

It was early during the afternoon of the next day that Slone, hearing the clip-clop of unshod ponies, went outside to look. One part of the lane he could see plainly, and into it stalked Joel Creech, leading the leanest and gauntest ponies Slone had ever seen. A man as lean and gaunt as the ponies stalked behind. Joel Creech and his father!

It took but an instant to strap on his belt and gun. Then Slone strode down his path, out into the lane toward Brackton's.

Before Slone reached the vicinity of the store he saw riders come out to meet the Creech party. It so happened there were more riders than usually frequented Brackton's at that hour. The old storekeeper came stumbling out and raised his hands. The riders could be heard, loud-voiced and excited. Slone drew nearer, and the nearer he got the swifter he strode.

"Bags of bones," some rider loudly said.

And then Slone drew close to the excited group. Brackton held the center; he was gesticulating; his thin voice rose piercingly.

"Creech! Whar's Peg an' the Roan? Gawd Almighty, man! You ain't meanin' them cayuses thar are all you've got left of thet grand bunch of hosses?"

There was scarcely a sound. All the riders were still. Slone fastened his eyes on Creech. He saw a gaunt, haggard face almost black with dust—worn and sad—with big eyes of terrible gloom.

"Didn't I tell you-all what'd happen?" shrilled Joel. "*Parched and starved!*"

Tears dimmed Brackton's eyes. "So help me Gawd, I'm sorry!" he exclaimed brokenly.

No one seemed to have noticed Slone, except Holley, who approached him with a warning look.

"Tell us what come off, Creech," said Brackton.

"Gimme a drink," Creech responded.

"Wal, damn my head!" Brackton cried. "Come on in, all of you—we're glad to see Creech home."

They all filed in, Holley staying close to Slone in the background.

"I heerd the flood comin' that night," Creech began. "I was alone an' it took time to git the hosses up. If Joel had been with me—mebbe—" His voice quavered and broke; then he resumed:

"I got the hosses over to the landin', an' yelled an' shot. Nobody heered. The river was risin' fast. Then the flood came down—black an' windy an' awful. I had hell gittin' the hosses back.

"Next mornin' two Piutes come down. They had lost mustangs up on the rocks. All the feed on my place was gone. The Piutes said there wasn't no chance north—no water—no grass—an' so I decided to go south, if we could climb over thet last slide. Peg broke her leg there, an'—I—I had to shoot her. But we climbed out with the rest of the bunch. We traveled five days west to head the canyons. No grass an' only a little water, salt at thet. Blue Roan was game if ever I seen a game hoss.

"One by one them hosses went down. An' at last, I couldn't—I couldn't see Blue Roan starvin'—dyin' right before my eyes—an' I shot him, too."

There was a long pause in Creech's narrative.

"Them Piutes will git paid if ever I can pay them. I'd parched myself but for them. We circled an' crossed them red cliffs an' then the strip of red sand, an' worked down into the canyon. Under the wall was a long stretch of beach—sandy—an' at the head of this we found Bostil's boat."

"Wal!" burst out Brackton. "Bostil's boat! Say, ain't Joel told you yet about thet boat?"

"No, Joel ain't said a word about the boat," replied Creech. "What about it?"

"It was cut loose jest before the flood."

Manifestly Brackton expected this to be staggering to Creech. But he did not even show surprise.

"There's a rider here named Slone—a wild-hoss wrangler," went on Brackton, "an' Joel swears this Slone cut the boat loose so's he'd have a better chance to win the race. Joel swears he tracked this feller Slone."

Slone broke into the group and faced Creech. "It's not true. I never cut that boat loose," he declared ringingly.

"Who're you?" queried Creech.

"My name's Slone. I rode in here with a wild horse, an' he won a race. Then I was blamed for this trick."

Creech's steady, gloomy eyes seemed to pierce Slone through. "An' Joel accused you?"

"So they say. I fought with him—struck him for an insult to a girl."

"Come round hyar, Joel," called Creech sternly. His big, scaly, black hand closed on the boy's shoulder. Joel cringed under it. "Son, you've lied. What for?"

Joel showed abject fear of his father. "He's gone on Lucy—an' I seen him with her," muttered the boy.

"An' you lied to hurt Slone?"

Joel would not reply to this in speech, though that was scarcely needed to show he had lied. He seemed to have no sense of guilt. Creech eyed him pityingly and then pushed him back.

"Men, my son has done this rider dirt," said Creech. "You-all see thet. Slone never cut the boat loose. Anyway, the crime was keepin' the boat out of the water fer days when my hosses could have been crossed."

"Creech, was there anythin' left in thet boat?" began Brackton with intense curiosity. "Anythin' on the ropes—or so—thet might give an idee who cut her loose?"

Creech made no reply to that. The gloom burned darker in his eyes.

Chapter Sixteen

Ransom

NO MOON showed that night, and few stars twinkled between the slow-moving clouds. The air was thick and oppressive, full of the day's heat that had not been blown away. Sheets and ropes of lightning, blazing white behind the black monuments, gave weird and beautiful grandeur to the desert.

Lucy Bostil had to evade her aunt to get out of the house, and the window, that had not been the means of exit since Bostil left, once more came into use. She had changed to her riding-habit.

Lucy feared she was a little late. Allaying the suspicions of Aunt Jane and changing her dress had taken time. She knew her way and could slip swiftly along with only a rustle of leaves she touched.

Suddenly she imagined she heard a step and she halted, still as a tree trunk. As she stood there listening she felt a presence—a strange, indefinable presence.

But she entered the lane and stole swiftly along toward the end of the grove. Paths crossed the lane at right angles, and at these points she went swifter.

Then she came to a wider path. She scarcely noted it and passed on. Then came a quick rustle—a swift shadow. Between two steps—as her heart leaped—violent arms swept her off the ground. A hard hand was clapped over her mouth. She was being carried swiftly through the gloom.

Cordts had got her! She almost fainted. But she felt her body released—she was placed upon her feet—the hand left her face.

"Don't yap, girl!" This command in a hard, low voice pierced her ears. She saw the glint of a gun held before her.

"I'll—be—quiet!" she faltered.

The man moved back a step. He was tall, gaunt, ragged. She peered up at him. In the dim light of the few stars she recognized Joel Creech's father.

"Oh, thank God!" she whispered, in the shock of blessed relief. "I thought—you were—Cordts!"

"Keep quiet!" he whispered sternly.

"What—on earth—does this—mean?" she gasped, very low.

Creech leaned down. His gaunt face, lighted by terrible eyes, made her recoil. "Bostil ruined me—an' killed my hosses," he whispered grimly. "An' I'm takin' you away. An' I'll hold you in ranson fer the King—an'—Sarchedon—an' all his racers!"

"Oh!" cried Lucy. "Oh, Creech! Then you mean me no harm!"

The man straightened up and stood a moment, darkly silent, as if her query had presented a new aspect of the case. "Lucy Bostil, I'm a broken man an' wild an' full of hate. But God knows I never thought of thet—of harm to you. No, child, I won't harm you. But you must obey an' go quietly, fer there's a devil in me."

"Where will you take me?" she asked.

"Down in the canyons, where no one can track me," he said. "I'm strikin' at Bostil's heart as he has broken mine. I'll send him word. An' I'll tell him if he won't give his hosses thet I'll sell you to Cordts."

"Creech, I'm afraid he won't. You'd better give me up. Let me go back. I'll never tell. I don't blame you."

"Thet ain't no use," he replied. "Don't talk no more. Git up hyar now an' ride in front of me."

He led her to a lean mustang. Lucy swung into the saddle. Suddenly she noticed another man, near at hand, holding two mustangs. He mounted, rode before her, and then she recognized Joel Creech.

"Ride on," said Creech, hitting her horse from behind.

And Lucy found herself riding single file, with two men and a pack horse, out upon the windy, dark sage slope. They faced the direction of the monuments, looming now and then so wierdly black and grand against the broad flare of lightning-blazed sky.

The horses trotted and swung up over the slope, turning gradually, evidently to make a wide detour round the Ford, until Lucy's back was toward the monuments. Before her stretched the bleak, barren, dark desert, and through the opaque gloom she could see nothing. Lucy knew she was headed for the north, toward the wild can-

yons, unknown to the riders.

What would Slone do? He would ride out on her trail. Lucy shivered for the Creeches if Slone ever caught up with them, and remembering his skill at tracking, and the fleet and tireless Wildfire, she grew convinced that Creech could not long hold her captive.

So as she rode on Lucy's mind was full. She was used to riding, and habit had such power over her that riding made the hours fleet. She was surprised to be halted, to see dimly low, dark mounds of rock ahead.

"Git off," said Creech.

"Where are we?" asked Lucy.

"Reckon hyar's the rocks. An' you sleep some, fer you'll need it." He spread a blanket, laid her saddle at the head of it, and dropped another blanket. "What I want to know is—shall I tie you up or not?" asked Creech. "If I do you'll git sore. An' this'll be the toughest trip you ever made."

"You mean will I try to get away from you—or not?" queried Lucy.

"Jest thet."

"Creech, if I give you my word not to try to get away, would you believe me?" she asked.

Creech was slow in replying. "Reckon I would," he said finally.

"All right, I'll give it."

"An' thet's sense. Now you lay down."

Lucy did as she was bidden and pulled the blanket over her. With eyes closed she thought it was all a dream. Then the feeling of the hard saddle as a pillow under her head told her she was indeed far from her comfortable little room. What would poor Aunt Jane do in the morning when she discovered who was missing? What would Holley do? And Slone—Lucy felt sorriest for him. And with her mind running on and on, seemingly making sleep impossible, the thoughts at last became dreams.

Lucy awakened at dawn. One hand ached with cold, for it had been outside the blanket. Her hard bed had cramped her muscles. In the gray of morning she saw the Creeches round a campfire.

Lucy got up then. She thanked her lucky stars that she had worn the thick riding-suit and her boots.

"Come an' eat," said Creech.

She ate, though the coarse fare sickened her. Once she looked curiously at Joel Creech. He had grown more haggard and sullen than ever before.

The Creeches did not loiter over the camp tasks. Lucy was left to herself. The place appeared to be a kind of depression from which the desert rolled away to a bulge against the rosy east, and the rocks behind rose broken and yellow, fringed with cedars.

"Git the hosses in, if you want to," Creech called to her, and then as Lucy started off to where the mustangs grazed she heard him curse his son. "Come back hyar! Leave the girl alone or I'll rap you one!"

Lucy drove three of the mustangs into camp, where Creech began to saddle them. The remaining one, the pack animal, Lucy found among the scrub cedars at the base of the low cliffs. When she drove him in Creech was talking hard to Joel, who had mounted.

"When you come back, work up this canyon till you git up. It heads on the pine plateau. I can't miss seein' you, or any one, long before you git up on top. An' you needn't come without Bostil's hosses. You know what to tell Bostil if he threatens you, or refuses to send his hosses, or turns his riders on my trail. Thet's all. Now git!"

Joel Creech rode away toward the rise in the rolling, barren desert.

"An' now we'll go on," said Creech to Lucy.

When he had gotten all in readiness he ordered Lucy to follow closely in his tracks. He entered a narrow cleft in the low cliffs which wound in and out, and was thick with sage and cedars. Lucy, riding close to the cedars, conceived the idea of plucking the little green berries and dropping them on parts of the trail where their tracks would not show. Warily she filled the pockets of her jacket.

Presently the narrow cleft opened into a low-walled canyon, full of debris from the rotting cliffs, and this in turn opened into a main canyon with mounting yellow crags.

Creech crossed this wide canyon and entered one of the many breaks in the wall. This one was full of splintered rock and weathered shale—the hardest kind of travel for both man and beast. Lucy remembered to drop some of the cedar berries upon hard ground or rocks.

That day was the swiftest and the most strenuous in all Lucy Bostil's experience in the open. At sunset, when Creech halted in a niche in a gorge between lowering cliffs, Lucy fell off her horse and lay still and spent on the grass.

Creech, after he had turned the horses loose, brought her a drink of cold water from the brook she heard somewhere near by.

"How—far—did—we—come?" she whispered.

"By the way round I reckon nigh sixty miles," he replied. "But we ain't half thet far from where we camped last night."

Then he set to work at camp tasks. Lucy shook her head when he brought her food, but he insisted, and she had to force it down.

Next day Creech climbed out of that low-walled canyon, and Lucy saw a wild, rocky country cut by gorges, green and bare, or yellow and cedared. The long, black-fringed line she had noticed the day before loomed closer, overhanging this crisscrossed region of canyons. Every half-hour Creech would lead them downward and presently climb out again. The going was not so hard and she finished that day in better condition than the first one.

Next day Creech proceeded with care and caution. Many times he left the direct route, bidding Lucy wait for him, and he would ride to the rims of canyons or the tops of ridges of cedar forests, and from these vantage-points he would survey the country. When Creech halted on a high crest that gave a sweeping vision of the broken tableland they had traversed Lucy made out for herself faint moving specks miles behind.

"I reckon you see thet," said Creech.

"Is someone trailing us?" asked Lucy, and she could not keep the tremor out of her voice.

"Wal, I should smile! Fer two days—an' it sure beats me. They've never had a sight of us. But they keep comin'."

"They! Who?" she asked swiftly.

"I hate to tell you, but I reckon I ought. Thet's Cordts an' two of his gang."

"Oh—don't tell me so!" cried Lucy, suddenly terrified.

"Cordts all right," replied Creech. "I knowed thet before I seen him. Fer two mornin's back I seen his hoss grazin' in thet wide canyon. But I thought I'd slipped by. Someone seen us. Or they seen our trail. Anyway, he's after

us. What beats me is how he sticks to thet trail."

"Creech, I've been leaving a trail," confessed Lucy.

"What!"

Then she told him how she had been dropping cedar berries and bits of cedar leaves along the bare and stony course they had traversed.

"Wal, I'm—" Creech stifled an oath. Then he laughed, but gruffly "You air a cute one. An' now if Cordts gits you there'll be only yourself to blame."

"Oh!" cried Lucy, frantically looking back. The moving specks were plainly in sight. "How can he know he's trailing me?"

"Thet I can't say. Mebbe he doesn't know. His hosses air fresh, though, an' if I can't shake him he'll find out soon enough who he's trailin'."

"Go on! We must shake him. I'll never do *that* again! For God's sake, Creech, don't let him get me!"

And Creech led down off the high open land into canyons again.

The day ended, and the night seemed a black blank to Lucy. Another sunrise found Creech leading on, sparing neither Lucy nor the horses. He kept on a steady walk or trot, and he picked out ground less likely to leave any tracks. He doubled on his trail. He traveled down stream beds where the water left no trail. That day the mustangs began to fail.

That night Lucy felt lost in an abyss. She dreamed of Cordts capturing her, of carrying her miles deeper into these wild and purple cliffs, of Slone in pursuit on the stallion Wildfire, and of a savage fight. And she awoke terrified and cold in the blackness of the night.

On the next day Creech traveled west through a wild and frowning canyon. And at every turn it seemed impossible to go farther over that narrow and rock-bestrewn floor. Yet Creech found a way on.

Then came hours of climbing such slopes and benches and ledges as Lucy had not yet encountered. The grasping spikes of dead cedar tore her riding-habit to shreds, and many a scratch burned her flesh. About the middle of the afternoon Creech led up over the last declivity, a yellow slope of cedar, to a flat, upland covered with pine and high bleached grass. They rested.

"We've fooled Cordts, you can be sure of thet," said Creech.

"Oh, you're sure we've lost him?" implored Lucy.

"Sure as I am of death. An' we'll make surer in crossin' this bench. It's miles to the other side where I'm to keep watch fer Joel. An' we won't leave a track all the way."

Lucy gazed before her under the pines. It was a beautiful forest, with trees standing far apart, yet not so far but that their foliage intermingled. A dry fragrance, thick as a heavy perfume, blew into her face.

"I can't go—any farther—today," she said.

"You'll have to come," he said. "There's no water on this side, short of thet canyon bed. An' acrost there's water close under the wall."

So they set out into the forest. And Lucy found that after all she could go on. The horses walked and on the soft, spring ground did not jar her.

The afternoon passed; the sun set off through the pines, a black-streaked, golden flare; twilight shortly changed to night. Lucy fell asleep on her horse. At last, sometime late in the night, when Creech lifted her from the saddle and laid her down, she stretched out on the soft mat of pine needles and

knew no more. She did not awaken until the afternoon of the next day. She was unable to walk or eat. Creech hung around her with a remorse he apparently felt, yet could not put into words.

"Do you think we're safe—from Cordts now?" she asked.

"I reckon so. He's no tracker."

"But suppose he *does* trail us?"

"Wal, I reckon I've a shade the best of Cordts at gunplay, any day."

Lucy regarded the man in surprise. "Oh, it's so—strange!" she said. "You'd fight for me. Yet you dragged me for days over these awful rocks!"

"Lucy, I never thought of thet when I ketched you. You was only a means to an end. Bostil hated me. He ruined me. I give up to revenge. An' I could only git thet through you."

"Creech, I'm not defending Dad. He's—he's no good where horses are concerned. I know he wronged you. Then why didn't you wait and meet him like a man instead of dragging me to this misery?"

"Wal, I never thought of thet, either. I wished I had."

Lucy felt better next day, and offered to help Creech at the few camp duties. He would not let her. There was nothing to do but rest and wait, and the idleness appeared to be harder on Creech than on Lucy. Once he said thoughtfully:

"I'm tryin' to remember somethin' I heerd at the Ford. I meant to ask you—" Suddenly he turned to her with animation. "I heerd you beat the King on a red hoss—a wild hoss!"

"It's true. An' Dad nearly had a fit!"

"Fer the Lord's sake tell me all about it."

Lucy told him about the race—and then she had to tell about Wildfire, and then about Slone. He crowed over Bostil's discomfiture. And when Lucy told him that Slone had dared her father to race, had offered to bet Wildfire and his own life against her hand, then Creech was beside himself.

"This hyar Slone—he *called* Bostil's hand! Say, Lucy, are you in love with him?"

Lucy admitted she was.

"An' your Dad's ag'in him! Why didn't the darn fool sell his stallion to your father?"

"He gave Wildfire to me."

"I'd have done the same. Wal, now, when you git back home what's comin' of it all?"

Lucy shook her head sorrowfully. "God only knows."

Creech put his big hand on her head. "Bostil won't lose his only girl—or his favorite hoss! Lucy, I never had no girl. But it seems I'm rememberin' them rides you used to have on my knee when you was little!"

Then he strode away toward the forest. Lucy watched him with a full heart, and as she thought of his overcoming the evil in him when her father had yielded to it, she suffered poignant shame. Lucy resolved with a passionate determination that her father must make ample restitution for the loss Creech had endured.

Next day about noon, when both wind and heat were high, Lucy was awakened from a doze. Creech was standing near her. When he turned his long gaze away from the canyon he was smiling. It was a smile at once triumphant and sad.

"Joel's comin' with the hosses!"

Lucy jumped up, trembling and agitated. "Oh! Where? Where?"

"Right down along the base of thet red wall. A line of hosses. Jest like a

few crawlin' ants! An' now they're creepin' out of sight."

"Oh, I can't see them!" cried Lucy. "Are you *sure!*"

"Positive an' sartin," he replied. "Joel's comin'."

It seemed an age to Lucy, waiting there, until she did see horses zigzagging the ridges below. They disappeared, and then it was another age before they reappeared close under the bulge of wall. She thrilled at sight of Sage King and Sarchedon. She got only a glimpse of them. Creech showed eagerness at first, and then went on with his campfire duties. While in camp he always cooked a midday meal.

Lucy saw the horses first. She screamed out. Creech jumped up in alarm.

Joel Creech, mounted on Sage King, and leading Sarchedon, was coming at a gallop. The other horses were following.

"What's his hurry?" demanded Lucy. "After climbing out of that canyon Joel ought not to push the horses."

"Wal, Lucy, I reckon I ain't likin' this hyar. Look at Joel!" muttered Creech, and he strode out to meet his son.

Lucy ran out, too, and beyond him. She saw only Sage King. He saw her, recognized her, and whistled even while Joel was pulling him in. For once the King showed he was glad to see Lucy. He had been having rough treatment. But he was not winded—only hot and wet. She assured herself of that, then ran to quiet the plunging Sarch. Lucy heard the other horses pounding up; she recognized Two Face's high whinny, like a squeal; and in her delight she was about to run to them when Creech's harsh voice arrested her.

"What did you say?" demanded Creech.

"I'd a good reason to run the hosses uphill—thet's what!" snapped Joel. He was frothing at the mouth.

"Out with it!"

"Cordts an' Hutch!"

"What?" roared Creech.

"Cordts an' Hutch rode in behind me down at thet cross-canyon. They seen me. An' they're after me hard!"

Creech wheeled away. "Help me pack. An' you, too, Lucy. We've got to rustle out of hyar."

The Creeches made short work of that breaking of camp. Soon they were riding into the forest, Creech leading, Lucy in the center, and Joel coming behind on the King. Two unsaddled mustangs carrying the packs were driven in front.

A cold dread had once more clutched Lucy's heart. What would be the end of this flight? The way Creech looked back increased her dread. How horrible it would be if Cordts accomplished what he had always threatened—to run off with both her and the King!

When they rode out of the forest, down a gentle slope of wind-swept grass, to an opening into a canyon Lucy was surprised to recognize the place. How quickly the ride through the forest had been made!

Creech dismounted. "Git off, Lucy. You, Joel, hurry an' hand me the little pack. Now I'll take Lucy an' the King down in hyar. You go thet way with the hosses an' make as if you was hidin' your trail, but don't. Savvy?"

"You're wantin' Cordts to split on the trail?" asked Joel.

"Sure. He'll ketch up with you sometime. But you needn't be afeared if he does."

"I ain't a-goin' to do thet."

"Why not?" Creech demanded.

"I'm a-goin' with you."

Creech evidently controlled his temper by an effort. "I'm takin' Lucy an' the King back to Bostil."

Joel echoed those words, slowly divining them. "Takin' them *both!* The girl—an' givin' up the King!"

"Yes, both of them. I've changed my mind, Joel. Now—you—"

But Creech never finished what he meant to say. Joel Creech was suddenly seized by a horrible madness. His strange eyes protruded. His jaw worked. He frothed at the mouth. He leaped, apparently to get near his father, but he missed his direction. Then he wheeled and made strange gestures, all the while cursing incoherently.

"Shut up!" roared Creech.

"No, I won't!" shrieked Joel, wagging his head in spent passion. "An' you ain't a-goin' to take thet girl home. I'll take her with me, I'll strip her naked—an' I'll—"

Lucy saw old Creech lunge and strike. She heard the sodden blow. Joel went down. But he scrambled up, reaching for his gun.

Creech jumped and grappled with Joel. There was a wrestling, strained struggle. Creech's hair stood up and his face had a kind of sick fury, and he continued to curse and command. They fought for the possession of the gun. But Joel seemed to have superhuman strength. Lucy saw him bend his arm in spite of the desperate hold upon it and fire the gun.

Creech's hoarse entreaties ceased as his hold on Joel broke. He staggered. His arms went up with a tragic, terrible gesture. He fell.

Joel stood over him, shaking and livid. He made the motion to sheath his gun but he only dropped it in the grass.

Sight of that dropped gun broke Lucy's spell of horror, which had kept her silent but for one scream. She measured the distance to Sage King. Joel was turning. Then Lucy darted at the King, reached him, and, leaping, was half up on him when he snorted and jumped, not breaking her hold, but keeping her from getting up. Then iron hands clutched her and threw her, like an empty sack, to the grass.

Joel Creech did not say a word. Lucy lay flat on her back, watching him. She knew she had been thrown near the spot where the gun lay. She watched Joel while he watched her. And she saw that he had his foot on the rope round Sage King's neck. The King never liked a rope. He was nervous. He tossed his head to get rid of it. Creech, watching Lucy all the while, reached for the rope, pulled the King closer and closer, and untied the knot. The King stood quiet, bridle down.

It seemed that Lucy located the gun without turning her eyes away from Joel's. She gathered all her force—rolled over swiftly—again—got her hands on the gun just as Creech leaped like a panther upon her. His weight crushed her flat—his strength made hers like that of a child. He threw the gun aside. Lucy lay face down, unable to move her body while he stood over her.

Creech tried to turn her. Lucy resisted. And she was strong. Resistance infuriated Creech. He cuffed her sharply. Then with hands like steel claws he tore away her blouse.

The shock of his hands on her bare flesh momentarily weakened Lucy, and Creech dragged at her until she lay seemingly helpless before him. He stroked her shoulder. His strange eyes

softened, then blazed with a different light.

Swift and vicious as a cat she fastened her teeth in his arm. She bit deep and held on. Creech howled like a dog. He beat her. He jerked and wrestled. Then he lifted her, and the swing of her body tore the flesh loose from his arm and broke her hold.

Lucy half rose, crawled, plunged for the gun. She got it, only to have Creech kick it out of her hand. Then he cut her across the bare back with the rope and she shrieked out. Supple and quick, she leaped up and ran. With a few bounds he had her again, tripped her up.

Creech leaned down, swinging the coiled rope. He meant to do more than lash her with it. Lucy's hands flashed up, closed tight in his long hair. Then with a bellow he jerked up and lifted her sheer off the ground. When he broke her hold there were handfuls of hair in Lucy's fists.

She fell again and had not the strength to rise. But Creech was raging, and little of his broken speech was intelligible. He knelt with a sharp knee pressing her down. He cut the rope. He noosed one end round her ankle, then the end of the other piece round her wrist. Rising, he retained hold on both ropes. He moved back, sliding them through his hands. Then with a quick move he caught up Sage King's bridle and led the horse near to Lucy.

Warily he reached down, lifted her, threw her over the King's back. He forced her down.

Lucy resisted all she could. He pulled her arms down round the King's neck and tied them close. Then he pulled hard on the rope on her ankle and tied that to her other ankle.

Lucy realized that she was bound fast. Creech had made good most of his threat. If only Creech would slip the bridle or cut the reins—if only Sage King could be free to run!

Lucy could turn her face far enough to see Creech. Like a fiend he was reveling in his work. Suddenly he picked up the gun.

"Look a-hyar!" he called hoarsely.

With eyes on her, grinning horribly, he walked a few paces to where the long grass had not been trampled or pressed down. The wind, whipping up out of the canyon, was still blowing hard. Creech put the gun down in the grass and fired.

Sage King plunged. But he was not gun-shy. He steadied down with a pounding of heavy hoofs. Then Lucy could see again. A thin streak of yellow smoke rose—a little snaky flame—a slight crackling hiss! Then as the wind caught the blaze there came a rushing, low roar. Fire, like magic, raced and spread before the wind toward the forest.

Lucy had forgotten that Creech had meant to drive her into fire. The sudden horror of it almost caused collapse. But Creech's hard hands quickened her. She could see him then, though not clearly. His face seemed inhuman, misshapen, gray. His hands pulled at her arms—a last precaution to see that she was tightly bound. Then with the deft fingers of a rider he slipped Sage

King's bridle.

Creech stepped back and laid a violent hand on Lucy's garments. She bent—twisted her neck to watch him. But her sight grew no clearer. Still she saw he meant to strip her naked. He braced himself for a strong, ripping pull. His yellow teeth showed deep in his lip. His contrasting eyes were alight with insane joy.

But he never pulled. Something attracted his attention. He looked. He saw something. His lips uttered a low, terrible cry.

Lucy felt the King trembling in every muscle. She knew that was fright. She expected his loud snort, and was prepared for it when it rang out. In a second he would bolt. She knew that. She thrilled. She tried to call to him, but her lips were weak. Creech seemed paralyzed.

Then the King whistled and reared. Lucy heard swift, dull, throbbing beats. Beats of a fast horse's hoofs on the run! Suddenly the air split to a high-pitched, wild, whistling blast. It pierced to Lucy's mind. She knew that whistle.

"Wildfire!" she screamed.

The King gave a mighty convulsive bound of terror. He, too, knew that whistle. And in that one great bound he launched out into a run. Straight across the line of burning grass! Lucy felt the sting of flame. Smoke blinded and choked her. Then clear, dry, keen wind sang in her ears and whipped her hair. The light about her darkened. The King had headed into the pines.

The heavy roar of the gale overhead struck Lucy with new and torturing dread. Sage King once in his life was running away, bridleless, and behind him there was fire on the wings of the wind.

Chapter Seventeen

"Send the King."

FOR the first time in his long experience Bostil found that horse-trading palled upon him. This trip to Durango was a failure. Something was wrong. And during the five days of the return trip the strange mood grew upon him.

The last day he and his riders covered over 50 miles and reached the Ford late at night. No one expected them, and only the men on duty at the corrals knew of the return. Bostil, much relieved to get home, went to bed and at once fell asleep.

He awakened at a late hour for him. When he dressed and went out to the kitchen he found that his sister had learned of his return and had breakfast waiting.

"Where's the girl?" asked Bostil.

"Not up yet," replied Aune Jane.

Bostil laughed. "Wal, call her an' tell her I'm home."

Aunt Jane did as she was bidden. Bostil finished his breakfast. But Lucy did not come.

Bostil began to feel something strange, and, going to Lucy's door, he knocked. There was no reply. Bostil pushed open the door. Lucy was not in evidence, and her room was not as tidy as usual. He saw her white dress thrown upon the bed she had not slept in. Bostil gazed around with a queer contraction of the heart. That sense of something amiss grew stronger. Then he saw a chair before the open window. Bostil looked out, and in the red earth beneath the window he saw fresh tracks of Lucy's boots. Then he

roared for Jane.

She came running, and between Bostil's furious questions and her own excited answers there was nothing arrived at. But presently she spied the white dress, and then she ran to Lucy's closet. From there she turned a white face to Bostil.

"She put on her riding-clothes!" gasped Aunt Jane.

"Supposin' she did! Where is she?" demanded Bostil.

"*She's run off with Slone!*"

Bostil strode out of the room and the house. He went through the grove and directly up the path to Slone's cabin. It was empty, just as Bostil expected to find it. The bars of the corral were down. Both Slone's horses were gone. Presently Bostil saw the black horse Nagger down in Brackton's pasture.

There were riders in front of Brackton's. All spoke at once to Bostil, and he only yelled for Brackton. The old man came hurriedly out, alarmed.

"Where's this Slone?" demanded Bostil.

"Slone!" ejaculated Brackton. "I'm blessed if I know. Ain't he home?"

Bostil waited to hear no more. He strode down the lane to the corrals. Farlane, Van, and other riders were there, leisurely as usual. Then Holley appeared, coming out of the barn. Bostil pulled a gun.

"Holley, I've a mind to bore you!"

The old hawk-eyed rider did not flinch. "What fer?" he queried.

"I left you to watch Lucy—an' she's gone!"

Holley showed genuine surprise and distress. The other riders echoed Bostil's last word. Bostil lowered the gun.

"Lucy's run off with Slone," said Bostil.

Van left the group of riders and came close to Bostil. "It ain't an hour back thet I seen Slone ride off alone on his red hoss."

"What of thet?" demanded Bostil. "Sure she was waitin' somewheres. They'd have too much sense to go together. Saddle up, you boys, an' we'll—"

"Say, Bostil, I happen to know Slone didn't see Lucy last night," interrupted Holley.

"A-huh! Wal, you'd better talk out."

"I trusted Lucy," said Holley. "But all the same, knowin' she was in love, I jest wanted to see if any girl in love could keep her word. So about dark I went down the grove an' watched fer Slone. Pretty soon I seen him. He sneaked along the upper end an' I follered. He went to thet bench up by the biggest cottonwood. An' he waited a long time. But Lucy didn't come. He must have waited till midnight. Then he left. I watched him go back—seen him go up to his cabin."

"Wal, if she didn't meet him, where was she? She wasn't in her room."

"Bostil, mebbe you ain't been told yet thet—thet Creech rode in yesterday. He lost all his racers! He had to shoot both Peg an' Roan!"

"A-huh! Is thet so? Wal, an' what did he say?"

Holley laughed a grim, significant laugh. "Creech said a lot! But let thet go now—come with me."

Holley started with rapid strides down the lane. Bostil followed. And he heard the riders coming behind.

Holley went straight to Lucy's window. He got down on his knees to scrutinize the tracks.

"Made more'n twelve hours ago," he said swiftly. "She had on her boots, but no spurs. Now let's see where she went."

Holley began to trail Lucy's progress through the grove, silently pointing now and then to a track.

"She stopped there," he said, "mebbe to listen. Looks like she wanted to cross the lane, but she didn't; here she got to goin' faster."

Holley reached an intersecting path and suddenly halted stock-still, pointing at a big track in the dust.

"My God! Bostil, look at thet!"

Bostil saw beside the big track a faint imprint of Lucy's small foot. That was the last sign of her progress and it told a story.

"Bostil, thet ain't Slone's track," said Holley ringingly.

"Sure it ain't. Thet's the track of a big man," replied Bostil. "An' whoever he was grabbed Lucy up—made off with her?"

"Plain as if we seen it done!" exclaimed Holley.

"Cordts!" cried Bostil hoarsely.

"Mebbe—mebbe. Come on."

Holley went so fast he almost ran, and he got ahead of Bostil. Finally several hundred yards out in the sage he halted, and again dropped to his knees. Bostil and the riders hurried on.

"Keep back; don't stamp round so close," ordered Holley. Then like a man searching for lost gold in sand and grass he searched the ground. When he arose there was a dark and deadly certainty in his face.

"Four mustangs an' two men last night," said Holley, rapidly. "Here's where Lucy was set down on her feet. Here's where she mounted. An' here's the tracks of a third man—tracks made this mornin'."

Bostil straightened up and faced Holley as if ready to take a death-blow. "I'm reckonin' them last is Slone's tracks."

"Yes, I know them," replied Holley.

"An' — them — other tracks? Who made them?"

"*Creech an' his son!*"

Bostil felt swept away by a dark, whirling flame. And when it passed he lay in his barn, in the shade of the loft, prostrate on the fragrant hay. His strength with his passion was spent. His spirit was broken.

By and by the riders came for him, got him up, and led him out. He shook them off and stood breathing slowly. The air felt refreshing; it cooled his hot, tired brain. It did not surprise him to see Joel Creech there, cringing behind Holley.

"Bostil," Holley began huskily, "you're to send the King—an' Sarch—an' Ben an' Two Face an' Plume to ransom Lucy! If you won't—then Creech'll sell her to Cordts!"

"Send the King—an' all he wants," Bostil said brokenly. "An' send word fer Creech to come back to the Ford. Tell him I said—my sin found me out!"

Chapter Eighteen

Pursuit

ON THE day that old Creech repudiated his son, Slone with immeasurable relief left Brackton's without even a word to the rejoicing Holley, and plodded up the path to his cabin. Before twilight set in he saw the Creeches riding out of the lane into the sage, evidently leaving the Ford.

He got his evening meal, cared for his horses, and just as darkness came on he slipped down into the grove for his rendezvous with Lucy. Reaching

the big cottonwood, he tried to compose himself on the bench to wait.

Lucy did not come. Waiting became hard. He wanted to go back toward the house—to intercept her on the way. Still he kept to his post, watchful, listening, his heart full.

He waited long after he became convinced she would not come. Upon his return through the grove he heard a step. He kept on, as before, and in the deep shadow he turned. He saw a man just faintly outlined. One of the riders had been watching him—had followed him! Slone had always expected this. So had Lucy. And now it had happened. But Lucy had found out or suspected the spy and she had outwitted him! Slone went back to his cabin.

Before he went to sleep, however, he heard the clatter of a number of horses in the lane. He could tell they were tired horses. Riders returning, he thought, and instantly corrected that, for riders seldom came in at night. And then it occurred to him that it might be Bostil's return. But then it might be the Creeches. Deciding that the first thing in the morning he would trail the Creeches, just to see where they had gone, he fell asleep.

In the morning, after he had done his work, he strolled out to take up their trail. It was not hard to follow in the lane, for no other horses had gone in that direction since the Creeches had left.

Half a mile out the road turned toward Durango. But the Creeches did not continue on that road. They entered the sage. Instantly Slone became curious.

He followed the tracks to a pile of rocks where the Creeches had made a greasewood fire and had cooked a meal. This was strange—within a mile of the Ford, where Brackton and others would have housed them. What was stranger was the fact that the trail started south from there and swung round toward the village.

Slone's heart began to thump. But he forced himself to think only of these tracks and not any significance they might have. He trailed the men down to a bench on the slope, a few hundred yards from Bostil's grove, and here a trampled space marked where a halt had been made and a wait.

And here Slone could no longer restrain conjecture and dread. He searched and searched. He got on his knees. He crawled through the sage all around the trampled space. Suddenly his heart seemed to receive a stab. He had found prints of Lucy's boots in the soft earth!

He ran back to his cabin, packed a saddlebag with meat and biscuits, filled a canvas water bottle, and, taking them and his rifle, he hurried out to the corral. First he took Nagger down to Brackton's pasture and let him in. Then returning, he roped the fiery stallion, saddled him, mounted him, and rode off with a hard, grim certainty that in Wildfire was Lucy's salvation.

Four hours later Slone halted on the crest of a ridge, in the cover of sparse cedars, and surveyed a vast, gray, barren basin yawning and reaching out to a rugged, broken plateau. Slone had long ago solved the meaning of the Creeches' flight. They would use Lucy to ransom Bostil's horses, and more than likely they would not let her go back.

The eyes of the wild-horse hunter had not searched that basin long before they picked out a dot. Slone watched it grow, and, hidden himself, he held his post until he knew the rid-

er was Joel Creech. Slone drew his own horse back and tied him to a bush amidst some scant grass. Then he returned to watch.

Slone was shaking when young Creech passed up and out of sight over the ridge—shaking with the deadly grip of passion such as he had never known. He waited, slowly gaining control, and at length went back for Wildfire.

Then he rode boldly forth on the trail. He calculated that old Creech would take Lucy to some wild retreat in the canyons and there wait for Joel and the horses. Creech had almost certainly gone on and would be unaware of a pursuer so close on his trail.

The sun had dipped full red in a golden west when Slone reached the wall of rocks and the cleft where Creech's tracks and Lucy's, too, marked the camp. Slone did not even dismount. Riding on into the cleft, he wound at length into a canyon and out of that into a larger one, where he found that Lucy had remembered to leave a trail, and down this to a break in a high wall, and through it to another winding canyon. The sun set.

There was rich grass and sweet water for his horse. He himself was not hungry, but he ate; he was not sleepy, but he slept. And daylight found him urging Wildfire in pursuit. On the rocky places Slone found the cedar berries Lucy had dropped. He welcomed sight of them, but he did not need them.

The trail grew rougher, steeper, harder, but the stallion kept his eagerness and his pace. On many an open length of canyon or height of wild upland Slone gazed ahead hoping to see Creech's mustangs. And then, suddenly, in the open, sandy flat of an intersecting canyon he came abruptly on a fresh trail of three horses, one of them shod.

Slone led his horse and walked on, disturbed in mind. When he came to a larger, bare, flat canyon bottom, where the rock had been washed clear of sand, he found no more cedar berries. They had been picked up. At the other extreme edge of this stony ground he found crumpled bits of cedar and cedar berries scattered in one spot, as if thrown there by someone who read their meaning.

"Cordts!" whispered Slone.

These canyons were the hiding-places of the horse thief. He and two of his men had chanced upon Creech's trail; and perhaps their guess at its meaning was like Slone's. It was then he let Wildfire choose his gait and the trail. Sunset, twilight, dusk, and darkness came with Slone keeping on and on. As long as there were no intersecting canyons or clefts or slopes by which Creech might have swerved from his course, just so long Slone would travel. And it was late in the night when he had to halt.

Early next day the trail led up out of the red and broken gulches to the cedared uplands. Slone saw a black-rimmed, looming plateau in the distance. All these winding canyons, and the necks of the high ridges between, must run up to that great tableland.

That day he lost two of the horse tracks. He did not mark the change for a long time after there had been a split in the party that had been trailing Creech. Then it was too late for him to go back to investigate, even if that had been wise. Possibly Cordts had split his party, one to trail along after Creech, the others to work around to head him off. Undoubtedly Cordts

knew this broken canyon country and could tell where Creech was going, and knew how to intercept him.

The trail led down again into a narrow canyon with low walls. Slone put all his keenness on what lay before him.

Wildfire's sudden break and upflinging of head and his snort preceded the crack of a rifle. The stallion bolted and ran a mile. Then Slone was able to look about him.

Along the right canyon rim, about 500 feet above him, he saw a bay horse, and a rider with a rifle. He did not see any wisdom in halting to shoot up at this pursuer, and he spurred Wildfire just as a sharp crack sounded above. The bullet thudded into the earth a few feet behind him. And then over bad ground, with the stallion almost unmanageable, Slone ran a gantlet of shots. Fortunately for Slone, broken ramparts above checked the unseen rifleman, and Slone saw no more of him.

It afforded him great relief to find that Creech's trail turned into a canyon on the left; and here, with the sun already low, Slone began to watch the clumps of cedars and the jumbles of rock. But he was not ambushed. Darkness set in, and, being tired out, he was about to halt for the night when he caught the flicker of a campfire. Slone dismounted and, leading Wildfire, went cautiously forward on foot, rifle in hand.

The canyon widened at a point where two breaks occurred, and the less restricted space was thick with cedar and piñon. Slone advanced boldly. He was amazed to see several dark forms moving to and fro before the bright campfire, and he checked himself abruptly. Considering a moment, Slone thought he had better have a look at these fellows. So he tied Wildfire and, taking to the darker side of the canyon, he stole cautiously forward.

Soon he made out the shadowy outlines of horses feeding in the open. He went slowly, carefully, noiselessly, and at last he crawled through the narrow aisles between thick sagebrush. Another clump of cedars loomed up, and he saw the flickering of firelight upon the pale-green foliage.

When he peered out from his covert the first thing to strike and hold his rapid glance was the slight figure of a girl. Stunned, he crouched down again with his hands clenched round his rifle. Had he really seen Lucy? He had heard of a girl now and then in the camps of these men, especially Cordts.

Slone had to force himself to look again. The girl had changed her position. But the light shone upon the men. Creech was not one of the three, nor Cordts, nor any man Slone had seen before. Again he lowered himself and waited. He caught the word "Durango" and "hosses" and "fer enough in," the meaning of which was vague. Then the girl laughed. And Slone found himself trembling with joy. Beyond any doubt that laugh could not have been Lucy's.

Slone stole back as he had come, reached the shadow of the wall, and drew away until he felt it safe to walk quickly. For a wonder Wildfire allowed himself to be led as well as if he had been old, faithful Nagger. Slone managed to stay in the outer edge of shadow cast by the wall. Wildfire winded the horses, halted, threw up his head, but it was one of the other horses that whistled an alarm.

Slone, holding Wildfire down, had no time to get into a stirrup, but leap-

ed to the saddle and let the horse go. There were hoarse yells and then streaks of fire and shots. Slone could not see whether the ground was smooth or broken, and he left that to Wildfire. Luck favored them, and presently Slone pulled him in to a safe gait.

Slone walked the horse for an hour, and then decided that he could well risk a halt for the night. Before dawn he was up, warming his chilled body by violent movements, and forcing himself to eat.

The rim of the west wall changed from gray to pink. Slone found the trail made by Creech's mustangs and by the horse of Cordts's man. The latter could not be very far ahead. In less than an hour Slone came to a clump of cedars where this man had camped. An hour behind him!

This canyon was open, with a level and narrow floor divided by a deep wash. Slone put Wildfire to a gallop. It was not long before Slone saw a horseman a quarter of a mile ahead, and he was discovered almost at the same time.

The man took to a side cleft. Slone kept on in pursuit. Then Slone was compelled to climb. Wildfire was so superior to the other's horse, and Slone was so keen at choosing ground and short cuts, that he would have been right upon him but for a split in the rock which suddenly yawned across his path. It was impassable. After a quick glance Slone abandoned the direct pursuit, and, turning along this gulch, he gained a point where the horse thief would pass under the base of the rim wall, and here Slone would have him within easy rifle shot.

And the man, intent on getting out of the canyon, rode into the trap, approaching to within 100 yards of Slone, who suddenly showed himself on foot, rifle in hand.

"Hold on!" he called warningly.

"Hold on yerself!" yelled the other, aghast, as he halted his horse.

Slone leveled the rifle. "I got it on you," he called.

"Reckon you hev."

"All right. Now talk fast—are you one of Cordts's gang?"

"Sure."

"Why are you alone?"

"We split down hyar."

"Who were you trailin'?"

"Ole Creech an' the girl he kidnaped."

"Why did Cordts split on the trail?"

"He an' Hutch went round fer some more of the gang, an' to head off Joel Creech when he comes in with Bostil's hosses."

Slone was amazed to find how the horse thieves had calculated; yet, on second thought, the situation, once the Creeches had been recognized, appeared simple enough.

"What was your game?" he demanded.

"I was follerin' Creech jest to find out where he'd hole up with the girl."

"What's Cordts's game—*after* he heads Joel Creech?"

"Then he's goin' fer the girl."

"Have you got a gun?" called Slone hoarsely.

"Sure."

"Ride back the other way! If you don't lose me I'll kill you!"

The man stared. Slone saw the color return to his pale face. Then he turned his horse and rode back out of sight. Slone heard him rolling the stones down the long, rough slope, and when he felt sure the horse thief had gotten a fair start he went back to mount Wildfire in pursuit.

When that day's hard, deadly pursuit ended, Slone found himself lost in the canyons. The fact nearly distracted him. He spent a sleepless night of torture.

All next day, like a wild man, he rode and climbed and descended, spurred by one purpose, pursued by suspense and dread. That night he tied Wildfire near water and grass and fell into the sleep of exhaustion.

Morning came. He rode down into a canyon with sloping walls, and broken, like all of these canyons under the great plateau. The upland was one vast network. The world seemed a labyrinth of canyons.

Then—he was gazing transfixed down upon the familiar tracks left by Creech's mustangs. Days old, but still unfollowed!

Chapter Nineteen

Through the Flames

THAT track led up the narrowing canyon to its head at the base of the plateau. At last Slone led Wildfire over the rim and halted for another breathing spell.

Wildfire sniffed the wind and snorted. Slone leaped into the saddle.

Straggling cedars on his left almost wholly obstructed Slone's view. Wildfire's ears and nose were pointed that way. Slone trotted him down toward the edge of this cedar clump so that he could see beyond. Before he reached it, however, he saw something blue, moving, waving, lifting.

"Smoke!" muttered Slone.

Wildfire was hard to hold as he rounded the edge of the cedars. Slone saw a line of leaping flame, a line of sweeping smokes, the grass on fire—horses!—a man!

Wildfire whistled his ringing blast of hate and menace, his desert challenge to another stallion.

The man whirled to look.

Slone saw Joel Creech—and Sage King—and Lucy, half naked, bound on his back!

Joy, agony, terror, in lightning-swift turns, paralyzed Slone. But Wildfire lunged out on the run.

Sage King reared in fright, came down to plunge away, and with a magnificent leap cleared the line of fire.

A few of Wildfire's lengthening strides quickened Slone's blood. Then Creech moved, also awaking from a stupefying surprise, and he snatched up a gun and fired. Slone saw the spurts of red, the puffs of white.

He guided the running stallion. In a few tremendous strides Wildfire struck Creech, and Slone had one glimpse of an awful face. The impact was terrific. Creech went hurtling through the air, limp and broken, to go down upon a rock, his skull cracking like a melon.

The horse leaped over the body and the stone, and beyond he leaped the line of burning grass.

Slone saw the King running into the forest. He saw Lucy's white body swinging with the horse's motion. One glance showed the great gray to be running wild.

Wildfire reached the pines. There down the open aisles between the black trees ran the fleet gray racer. Wildfire saw him and snorted. The King was 100 yards to the fore.

There was a roar overhead, heavy, almost deafening. Wildfire leaped in fright. Slone turned. Fire had run up

a pine tree which exploded as if the trunk were powder!

Slone realized that no horse could outrun wind-driven fire in a dry pine forest. He grew old at the thought.

The dry, pine-scented air made breathing hard; the gray racer, carrying that slender, half-naked form, white in the forest shade, lengthened into his fleet and beautiful stride; the motion of Wildfire, so easy, so smooth, so swift, and the fierce reach of his head shooting forward—all these proved that it was no dream.

The red horse had not gained a yard on the gray. Slone, keen to judge distance, saw this, and for the first time he doubted Wildfire's power to run down the King. Not with such a lead! It was hopeless—so hopeless—

He turned to look back. He saw no fire, no smoke—only the dark trunks, and the massed green foliage in violent agitation against the blue sky. That revived a faint hope. If he could get a few miles ahead, before the fire began to leap across the pine crests, then it might be possible to run out of the forest if it were not wide.

Then a stronger hope grew. It seemed that foot by foot Wildfire was gaining on the King. Slone studied the level forest floor sliding toward him. He lost his hope—then regained it again, and then he spurred the horse.

Slone saw that the King carried no saddle, so with Lucy on him he was light. He ought to run all day with only that weight. Wildfire carried a heavy saddle, a pack, a water bag, and a rifle. Slone untied the pack and let it drop.

Suddenly Slone's ears rang with a terrible on-coming roar. For an instant the unknown sound stiffened him, robbed him of strength. He had to race against fire. There were miles of dry forest, like powder.

He goaded the horse. Then he looked back.

Through the aisles of the forest he saw a strange, streaky, murky something moving, alive, shifting up and down, never an instant the same. Hot puffs shot forward into his face. His eyes smarted and stung. His ears hurt and were growing deaf. The tumult grew to be so great a roar that he no longer heard.

And he turned to face ahead. The stallion stretched low on a dead run; the tips of the pines were bending before the wind; and wildfire, the terrible thing for which his horse was named, was leaping through the forest.

Ahead of Slone, down the aisles, low under the trees spreading over the running King, floated swiftly some medium, like a transparent veil. It carried faint pin-points of light—sparks.

Slone goaded the stallion, raking his flanks. Wildfire answered with a scream and a greater speed.

Slone fought the desire to look back, but he could not resist it. A hot wind, like a blast from a furnace, blew light, stinging particles into his face. The fire was racing in the treetops, while below all was yet clear. A lashing, leaping flame engulfed the canopy of pines. It was white, seething, inconceivably swift, with a thousand flashing tongues.

Wildfire was outracing wind and fire, but now he was no longer racing to kill the King; he was running in terror. For miles he held that long, swift, wonderful stride without a break.

Slone untied his lasso and coiled the noose.

Closer and closer drew Wildfire. He

seemed to go faster and faster as that wind of flame gained upon them. The air was too thick to breathe. It had an irresistible weight. It pushed horses and riders onward in their flight—straws on the crest of a cyclone.

Wildfire was running down the King. The great gray had not lessened his speed, but he was breaking. Wildfire suddenly whistled one shrieking blast.

Slone looked. Ahead there was light through the forest! Slone saw a white, open space of grass—the end of the forest! Wildfire, like a demon, hurtled onward, with his smoothness of action gone, beginning to break, within a length of the King.

Then, with the open just ahead, Slone felt a wave of hot wind rolling over him. He saw the lashing tongues of flame above him in the pines. The storm had caught him. It forged ahead. He was riding under a canopy of fire. Burning pine cones, like torches, dropped all around him. He had a terrible blank sense of weight, of suffocation, of the air turning to fire.

Then Wildfire, with his nose at Sage King's flank, flashed out of the pines into the open. Slone saw a grassy wide reach inclining gently toward a dark break in the ground with crags rising sheer above it, and to the right a great open space.

Slone felt that clear air as the breath of deliverance. His reeling sense righted. There—the King ran, blindly going to his death. Wildfire was breaking fast. His momentum carried him. He was almost done.

Slone roped the King, and holding hard, waited for the end. They ran on, breaking, breaking. Slone thought he would have to throw the King, for they were perilously near the deep cleft in the rim. But Sage King went to his knees.

Slone leaped off just as Wildfire fell. How the blade flashed that released Lucy! She was wet from the horse's sweat and foam. She slid off into Slone's arms, and he called her name. The pieces of rope hung to her wrists and Slone saw dark bruises, raw and bloody. She plucked at him with nerveless hands. She pressed close to him. He heard a smothered voice.

"Put—your—coat—on me!"

Slone started violently. Shamed to realize he had forgotten she was half nude, he blindly tore off his coat, blindly folded it around her.

"Lin! Lin!" she cried.

"Lucy— Oh! are y-you—" he replied, huskily.

"I'm not hurt. I'm all right."

"But that wretch, Joel. He—"

"He'd killed his father—just a—minute—before you came. I fought him! Oh! But I believe I'm all right. Lin, did you—"

"Wildfire ran him down—smashed him—"

"Let me loose—a second," she said. "I want to—get in your coat."

As he turned away he felt a swift wind, then a strange impact from an invisible force that staggered him, then the rend of flesh. After that came the heavy report of a gun.

Slone fell. He knew he had been shot. Following the rending of his flesh came a hot agony. It was in his shoulder, high up, and the dark, swift fear for his life was checked.

Lucy stood staring down at him, unable to comprehend, slowly paling. Slone saw her, saw the edge of streaming clouds of smoke above her, saw on the cliff beyond the gorge two men, one with a smoking gun half leveled. The sight of Cordts electrified him.

"Lucy! drop down! quick!"

"Oh, what's happened? You–you–"

"I've been shot. Drop down, I tell you. Get behind the horse an' pull my rifle."

It was then Lucy Bostil saw Cordts across the gulch. He was not 50 yards distant and plainly recognizable, tall, gaunt, sardonic.

"*Cordts!*"

"Hunch down, Lucy!" cried Slone. "Pull my rifle–I'm only winged–not hurt. Hurry! He's goin'–"

Another heavy report interrupted Slone. The bullet missed, but Slone made a pretense, a convulsive flop, as if struck.

"Get the rifle! Quick!" he called.

Lucy ran to the fallen Wildfire and jerked the rifle from its sheath.

Cordts had begun to climb round a ledge, evidently a short cut to get down and across. Hutchinson saw the rifle and yelled to Cordts. The horse thief halted, his dark face gleaming toward Lucy.

When Lucy rose the coat fell from her nude shoulders. She swept up the rifle. It wavered.

Hutchinson was above, and Cordts, reaching up, yelled for help. Hutchinson leaned down–clasped Cordts's outstretched hands, and pulled.

Slone tried to call to Lucy to shoot low. He saw her white, rounded shoulders bent, with cold, white face pressed against the rifle, with slim arms quivering and growing tense, with the tangled golden hair blowing out.

Then she shot.

Cordts leaned against the cliff. Hard hit! He would not–he could not let go of Hutchinson. His was a death clutch. The burly Hutchinson slipped and as he moved Cordts swayed, his feet left the ledge, he hung, upheld only by the tottering comrade.

What a harsh and terrible cry from Hutchinson! He made one last convulsive effort and lost his balance. Cordts's dark, evil face swung round. Both men became lax and plunged.

Then the dark forms shot down–Cordts falling sheer and straight, Hutchinson headlong, with waving arms–down and down, vanishing in the depths. No sound came up.

Chapter Twenty

"Here's the King!"

DARKNESS seemed to blot out Slone's sight, and then passed away, leaving it clearer. Lucy was bending over him, binding a scarf round his shoulder and under his arm. She finished and stood back.

Slone sat up. The smoke was clearing away. Little curves of burning grass were working down along the rim. He pointed to the ledge across the chasm.

"They're–gone!" cried Lucy. She shook violently.

"Wildfire! The King!" he added hoarsely.

"Both where they dropped. Oh, I'm

afraid to–to look– And, Lin, I saw Sarch, Two Face, and Ben and Plume go down there."

She had her back to the chasm where the trail led down, and she pointed without looking.

Slone got up, a little unsteady on his feet and conscious of a dull pain.

"Sarch will go straight home, and the others will follow him," said Lucy. "They got away here where Joel came up the trail. The fire chased them out of the woods. Sarch will go home. And that'll fetch the riders."

"We won't need them if only Wildfire and the King–" Slone broke off and grimly, with a catch in his breath, turned to the horses.

Sage King was a beaten horse, but he would live to run another race.

Lucy was kneeling beside Wildfire, sobbing and crying, "Wildfire! Wildfire!"

All of Wildfire was white except where he was red, and that red was not now his glossy, flaming skin. A terrible muscular convulsion grew slower and slower. Yet choked, blinded, dying, killed on his feet, Wildfire heard Lucy's voice.

"Oh, Lin! Oh, Lin!" moaned Lucy.

While they knelt there the violent convulsions changed to slow heaves.

"He run the King down–carryin' weight–with a long lead to overcome!" Slone muttered, and he put a shaking hand on the horse's wet neck.

"Wildfire! Wildfire!"

Again Lucy called to her horse, with a low and piercing cry. But Wildfire did not hear.

The morning sun glanced brightly over the rippling sage which rolled away from the ford like a gray sea.

Bostil sat on his porch, a stricken man. He faced the blue haze of the north, where days before all that he had loved had vanished. Every day, from sunrise till sunset, he had been there, waiting and watching. His riders were grouped near him, silent, awed by his agony, awaiting orders that never came.

From behind a ridge puffed up a thin cloud of dust. Bostil saw it and gave a start. Above the sage appeared a bobbing, black object–the head of a horse. Then the big black body followed.

"Sarch!" exclaimed Bostil.

With spurs clinking the riders ran and trooped behind him.

"More hosses back," said Holley.

"Thar's Plume!" exclaimed Farlane.

"An' Two Face!" added Van.

"Dusty Ben!" said another.

"Riderless!" finished Bostil.

Sarchedon and his followers broke from trot to canter–canter to gallop –and soon were cracking their hard hoofs on the stony court. Like a swarm of bees the riders swooped down upon the racers, caught them, and led them up to Bostil. On Sarchedon's neck showed a dry, dust-caked stain of reddish tinge.

"Wal, thet's a bullet mark, plain as day," said Holley.

"Who shot him?" demanded Bostil.

Holley shook his gray head.

"He smells of smoke," put in Farlane, who had knelt at the black's legs. "He's been runnin' fire. See thet! Fetlocks all singed!"

"Reckon thar's been hell!" muttered Holley darkly.

Some of the riders led the horses away toward the corrals. Bostil wheeled to face the north again. His brow was lowering; his cheek was pale and sunken; his jaw was set.

The riders came and went, but Bostil kept his vigil. The hours passed. Afternoon came and wore on. The sun lost its brightness and burned red.

Again dust clouds, now like reddened smoke, puffed over the ridge. A horse carrying a dark, thick figure appeared above the sage.

Bostil leaped up. "Is thet a gray hoss—or am—I blind?" he called unsteadily.

Holley shaded the hawk eyes with his hand. "Gray he is—Bostil—gray as the sage—*an' so help me God if he ain't the King!*"

Bostil shook his huge frame, and he rubbed his eyes as if they had become dim, and he stared again.

"Who's thet up on him?"

"Slone. I never seen his like on a hoss," replied Holley.

"An' what's—he packin'?" queried Bostil huskily.

"It's Lucy! I seen thet long ago."

A strange, fleeting light of joy died out of Bostil's face. The change once more silenced his riders. They watched the King trotting in from the sage. His head drooped. He seemed grayet than ever and he limped. He came on, quickening a little to the clamoring welcome from the corrals.

Holley put out a swift hand. "Bostil—the girl's alive—she's smilin'!" he called.

The riders waited for Bostil. Slone rode into the courtyard. He was white and weary, reeling in the saddle. A bloody scarf was bound round his shoulder. He held Lucy in his arms. She had on his coat. A wan smile lighted her haggard face.

Bostil, cursing deep, like muttering thunder, strode out. "Lucy! You ain't bad hurt?" he implored.

"I'm—all right—Dad," she said, and slipped down into his arms.

He kissed the pale face and held her up like a child, and then, carrying her to the door of the house, he roared for Aunt Jane.

When he reappeared the crowd of riders scattered from around Slone. But it seemed that Bostil saw only the King. The horse was caked with dusty lather, scratched and disheveled, weary and broken, yet he was still beautiful.

Slowly the gaze of Bostil moved away from Sage King and roved out to the sage and back, as if he expected to see another horse. But no other horse was in sight. At last his hard eyes rested upon the white-faced Slone.

"Been some—hard ridin'?" he queried haltingly.

"Pretty hard—yes," replied Slone. He was weary, yet tight-lipped, intense.

"Now—them Creeches?" slowly continued Bostil.

"Dead."

A murmur ran through the listening riders, and they drew closer.

"Both of them?"

"Yes. Joel killed his father, fightin' to get Lucy—an' I ran—Wildfire over Joel—smashed him!"

"Wal, I'm sorry for the old man," replied Bostil, gruffly. "I meant to make up to him— But thet fool boy! An' Slone—you're all bloody."

He stepped forward and pulled the scarf aside. "Been bored, eh? Wal, it ain't low, an' thet's good. Who shot you?"

"Cordts."

"*Cordts!*" Bostil leaned forward in sudden, fierce eagerness.

"Yes, Cordts. His outfit run across Creech's trail an' we bunched. I can't tell now, but we had—hell! An' Cordts is dead—so's Hutch—an' that other pard of his. Bostil, they'll never haunt your sleep again!"

Bostil raised both his huge fists. "You mean to tell me you did fer Cordts an' Hutch what you did fer Sears?" he boomed out.

"They're dead—gone, Bostil—honest to God!" replied Slone.

Bostil lost his deep fury of passion, and there seemed only a resistless and speechless admiration left. Then ensued a moment of silence.

"Where's the red stallion?" queried Bostil.

Slone raised eyes dark with pain, yet they flashed as he looked straight up into Bostil's face. "Wildfire's dead!"

"*Dead!*" ejaculated Bostil.

Another moment of strained suspense.

"Shot?" he went on.

"No."

"What killed him?"

"The King, sir! Killed him on his feet!"

Bostil's heavy jaw bulged and quivered. His hand shook as he laid it on Sage King's mane—the first touch since the return of his favorite.

"Slone—what—is it?" he said brokenly.

"Sage King killed Wildfire on his feet. A grand race, Bostil. But Wildfire's dead—an' here's the King! Ask me no more. I want to forget."

Bostil put his arm around the young man's shoulder. "Slone, if I don't know what you feel fer the loss of thet grand hoss, no rider on earth knows! Go in the house. Boys, take him in—all of you—an' look after him."

The late rains came and like magic, in a few days, the sage grew green and lustrous and fresh, the gray turning to purple.

Every morning the sun rose white and hot in a blue and cloudless sky. And then soon the horizon line showed creamy clouds that rose and spread and darkened. Every afternoon storms hung along the ramparts and rainbows curved down beautiful and ethereal.

Slone and Lucy never rode down so far as the stately monuments, though these held memories as hauntingly sweet as others were poignantly bitter. Lucy never rode the King again. But Slone rode him, learned to love him.

She rode Sarchedon, and she liked to trot or lope along beside Slone while they linked hands and watched the distance. But her glance shunned the north, that distance which held the wild canyons and the broken battlements and the long, black, pine-fringed plateau.

"Won't you ever ride with me, out to the old camp, where I used to wait for you?" asked Slone.

"Some day," she said softly.

"When?"

"When—when we come back from Durango," she replied. And Slone was silent, for that planned trip to Durango, with its wonderful gift to be, made his heart swell.

And so on this rainbow day, with storms all around them, and blue sky above, they rode only as far as the valley. But from there, before they turned to go back, the monuments appeared close, and they loomed grandly with the background of purple bank and creamy cloud and shafts of golden lightning.

They seemed like sentinels—guardians of a love born under their lofty heights, in the lonely silence of day, in the star-thrown shadow of night. And they held Lucy and Slone, calling every day, giving them a nameless and tranquil content. THE END

A Zane Grey Western Award Story

The Man Who Rode Back

By NORMAN A. FOX

FIRST the town had been a heat-dazed cluster of buildings dancing in the distance, but twilight lay upon the land before Conroy walked his mount into the main street, and thus, across the last miles, he'd had Arrowhead's lights to draw him. Especially the one. He could see the house on the hill overlooking the town; he could see the single light glowing in an upstairs window, and this was his beacon —a strange sort of beacon both drawing and repelling him. Even at Arrowhead's outskirts he thought of turning back; a grim stubbornness prodded him onward. He had come home, but the town was a dark taste in his mouth.

He might have ridden through—his real destination lay beyond, in the shadow of the hills grown vague and shapeless with the night. Instead, he passed between the two rows of false fronts and left his horse at the livery and came spur-jangling back along the boardwalk, a tall, hard-hewed man with eyes too old for his face.

He was hungry, but he passed by the restaurants and at last took a stand on the gallery of the Overland Hotel. From here he could see the house on the hill, and he kept an aimless vigil, hiding his thoughts behind a bleakness that left his face unmoved. He shaped up a cigarette and another and

Mal Conroy returns to Arrowhead, convinced that "when you lose a needle, you got to look in the haystack where you lost it." He finds that the haystack has changed, but then, though Arrowhead and Jessie Beecham fail to realize it, neither is the Mal Conroy who comes riding back the same one who made the vengeful threat in court five years before. The author of this ZGWM original has been given a Zane Grey Western Award in recognition of its fine dramatic qualities and skillfully developed theme.

waited out an hour; and then Pete Purvis came.

He had known that Purvis would be along; you could set a clock by some men's habits, and five years would have made no dent in Purvis. The big man waddled along the boardwalk, making his nightly rounds, and, seeing Conroy, shambled to a stop. Lamplight, falling from the hotel's open door, reflected from the ball-pointed star on Purvis's calfskin vest; he was Arrowhead's law, a deputy appointed by the county seat, 30 alkaline miles across the flats, and he kept that star term in and term out by a dexterity at fence-straddling which was his only real skill.

Purvis said, "Well, Mal?"

Conroy ground out his cigarette beneath his heel and took a slaunchwise stand, at once ready and remote, and he said harshly, "Get it off your chest."

Purvis drew in a breath, and his arrogance was transparent. "I knew you'd be along. They write us about such things." His small eyes touched Conroy, running from Conroy's scuffed boots to his shapeless sombrero and dwelling the longest on the holstered gun at Conroy's hip. "You did yourself proud on the ten dollars."

Conroy said, "A poker hand helped, but the best I could do was a forty-dollar horse."

Purvis dropped his arrogance and said anxiously, "Why don't you ride on? There's nothing for you here."

Conroy said, "When you lose a needle, you got to look in the haystack where you lost it."

"Gad!" Purvis said. "You even talk like old Jud! If I heard him say that once, I heard him say it twenty times."

"Maybe I'd like to see Steve," Conroy said.

Purvis was suddenly helpless, a man handling something too big for him. "I know why you came back. Hell, you're too late! Judge Beecham's bad sick; Doc Thurl's been with him night and day. Lew won't be leaving his house till he goes out feet first. You might as well forget what you said in court; you'll never line a gun on Beecham."

Conroy looked again toward the house on the hill; the single light winked at him derisively, taunting him. He thought, *I hadn't counted on Beecham's being down on his back.* He thumbed back his sombrero; he had sandy hair close-cropped the way they cut it in Deer Lodge pen. His face stayed impassive.

Purvis said again, "Why don't you ride on?" He was more than a little desperate. "Man, you washed yourself up with Jessie Beecham before you left! Do you think she has anything on her mind these days but her dad?"

Conroy's lips drew straight, and he said, "Keep your notions to yourself, Purvis!" He said it flatly; he watched Purvis wilt.

"They turned you loose for good behavior," Purvis said. "Don't go making me no trouble, Mal."

Conroy said, "Move along, fat man."

He watched Purvis go, waiting out the time another cigarette took, and then he moved back toward the livery stable. The town still tasted bad to him; it was a quiet town tonight, but he didn't like its quietness. He saw many horses before the hitchrails of the saloons, but the raucous sounds of revelry were missing. He wondered about that with a corner of his mind; he thought of the lost five years and wondered if towns turned mature as people did, growing grave and settled and dull.

Up in the house on the hill, a figure passed between the lamp and the drawn shade of the one lighted window, and for a moment the figure was silhouetted, and Conroy stood rooted, fancying it was Jessie Beecham. The figure moved; the moment was lost, but it left him shaken until he forced himself onward again, spurred by anger and impotence.

He got his horse from the livery and saddled up and lighted out to the north, holding the mount to an easy walk. The night wrapped itself around him; and he liked this—he liked the aloneness. Impatience came upon him, but still he didn't push his mount; he had asked enough of the horse today. The hills loomed larger, and he sighted by one pine-darkened crest; the old landmarks were unchanged, but he found a fence or two he hadn't remembered. The moon was up when he reached his destination; silver touched the ramshackle buildings, and the only movement was of horses in a pasture. He wondered why the horses had been turned out.

He came down in the yard before the shake-roofed log ranch house and called out softly, "Steve— Steve—" When there was no answer, he knew that he had expected none. He groped to the door and found it unbarred, and he got a match flaming when he stepped inside. The one room held a rusty stove, some rickety furniture, a double bunk. He lit a lamp and had a real look around.

Steve was an untidy bachelor; clothes hung from the chairs, and the stove was greasy and littered. He picked up a pair of Steve's pants and saw that he could have got into them himself. He'd forgotten that Steve was 19 now.

The letter lay opened upon the table. He looked down at his own cramped writing and made out the tag end of his brief message: . . . *so I'll be heading home, kid. As near as I can figure it, I should make it about the 18th.*

He went outside and had a look around. Up the rise a headboard glimmered in the moonlight, and he strode there, drawn by something that was neither sentiment nor curiosity. A legend had been burned into the headboard by a running iron: JUD CONROY, followed by the dates of old Jud's birth and death; 67 futile years lay between those dates.

Steve had tended to the grave. There were even wild flowers, planted in the broken half of a whisky jug set into the mound. A whisky jug and a running iron! These things had marked also Jud Conroy's way of living.

Conroy stood looking and he thought, *You weren't much as an old man. You let us run wild, and we were bound to tangle our twine. But, damn it, you were our dad, and you're dead now.* And he took off his hat.

He lingered thus in the moonlight, and then he said, "Steve–!" saying it aloud, and a sudden terrible truth was his.

It was born of more than intuition. It was the taking of forgotten shards of knowledge and piecing them together, and he saw a pattern then, made of all his wild upbringing on this ragtag ranch and his angry threat in court five years ago; to these things he added Pete Purvis's uneasiness tonight, and the calculated quietness of the town, and he knew what sickness possessed Lew Beecham and why Steve Conroy was gone from the ranch.

He came down from the rise in frantic desperation, and he found a lariat in the barn and went to the pasture and laid a loop on one of the horses. He got his saddle onto this horse, turning his own weary mount into the pasture; and he lined out for Arrowhead, galloping hard the first miles until reason restored itself. He'd had five years for learning patience; he'd got patience ingrained into him. He came into town unobtrusively as a shadow and left the horse at the first hitchrail and cat-footed along the boardwalk until he found a space between two buildings where he could lose himself.

He took his own time reaching the jail, a log and frame structure near the outskirts with a weedy yard flanking it, and he moved into this yard, pausing beneath each of the cell windows until he found the one that held a faint stirring. He said, "Steve–?" softly, and a face framed itself in the barred window, the moonlight touching the face. It was a younger mirror of his own.

Steve said, "Mal!" joyously.

Conroy said, "What the blazes did you do it for, kid?"

Steve frowned. "You know?"

"I've guessed. You must have gone hunting him as soon as you got my letter."

"Not to make gun talk, Mal. I had to rub it in that you'd been paroled. He was down in the Stockmen's Bar. We both got mighty hot–the judge always had a hair-trigger temper. When we run out of words, he tried for a gun. I didn't have a choice, Mal."

"You fool!" Conroy said. "Lew Beecham stands for something in this town. Do you know what they're doing? Bellying up to the bars and waiting to see if he dies."

Fear touched Steve's face, but the defiance was still in him. "At your trial, he didn't give a hoot whether you'd slow-elked a little beef for our frying pan, Mal. He'd heard you were doing some moonlight riding with Jessie. And the Conroys were no account in his mind."

Conroy said wearily, "Was that any reason to go prodding him five years after?"

"You're sore, Mal. You came back here to gun him yourself, and you're sore because I did that for you!"

"Hell," Conroy said, "it's done now."

"You'd better ride on, Mal," Steve said. "They'll figure you're staying here to back me." He laughed; his laughter was shaky. "One Conroy out of the pen–another going in. But it was self-defense; they can't give me much of a jolt."

"You damn' fool," Conroy said and turned away.

He came back to the boardwalk, showing himself boldly. He went to a restaurant and had himself some supper; he felt many eyes upon him while he ate, and one or two people spoke, giving him a guarded howdy. But the antagonism was stark and tangible and the feel of it was here. People, he reflected, put their own estimate on a man's actions, and they had old Jud to remember, too. Afterward he came again to the street. He looked toward the house on the hill and the light still burned. He went to the Overland and bought himself a room.

In it, he laid his sombrero upon the bed, and, without lighting the lamp, hauled a chair to the window and sat, building cigarette after cigarette. His hard sucking at the tobacco highlighted his face intermittently; it was impassive. He heard every sound of the town; he interpreted these sounds and found them not to his liking.

Hoofs clattered along the street; cowboys rode in from outlying ranches to clomp into the saloons. Once he saw a rider stop a street loiterer and make talk, and both looked toward the house on the hill. Pete Purvis came waddling along, making his eternal rounds; he paused now and then, and his voice, when he lifted it, held only the ghost of alarm. Purvis disappeared in the direction of the jail.

Midnight came and still Conroy sat unmoving. And then he heard the knock on the door.

"Come in," he said.

The door creaked; Conroy turned and at first he had only the impression of a vague shapelessness; the thing that identified her was an intangible, made of old memories, made of five years of futile dreaming.

He said, "Jessie!" and came to his feet, spilling the chair, and she moved toward him in the darkness. She wore a long, rustling dress and the years had filled her out, and she was a woman.

She said, "Mal!" and sagged against him; only his arms kept her from falling.

He held her, stroking her hair, feeling a strange triumph because she was here and a strange emptiness because this moment could hold no real happiness. She was shaking, and her fear was a contagion. He tried to banish this; he said, "Jessie! Jessie! Have you ever thought of the cave?"

She lifted her face. "I've ridden there many times, Mal. Alone."

He said, "Then you were waiting, too."

She shuddered. The shudder ran through her and transmitted itself to him. She said, "Dad died twenty minutes ago."

He drew in his breath hard, and all his world went reeling. He had expected this, yet the impact of it left him stunned. Then he said, "How many know?"

"Only Doc Thurl. People came up during the evening to ask about Dad. They told me you were back. I found your name on the register. Doc Thurl is probably coming down the hill now." Her voice rose. "Ride out, Mal!"

He held her at arm's length, his hands upon her shoulders. "Why?" he asked.

She looked at him; even in this gloom he could see that her face had fallen apart with grief. "They may come after you," she said. "They remember that you threatened Dad. They'll know you came back to get

him but that Steve got at him first." Hysteria edged her voice. "I suppose I should be glad it was Steve instead of you. But what's the difference, really? Steve always patterned himself after you!"

"But you wanted me to have my chance to clear out," he said, and the wonder of it was in his voice; he was trying hard to hold onto this miracle.

"You asked me if I remembered the cave, Mal. God help me, I never could forget it. Now will you ride out while there's still time?"

He said, "You'd better leave first, Jessie."

He took her to the door; he paused there, holding her back, and he tilted her chin and kissed her. "Thanks," he said, but he could taste salt in the kiss, and this was a strange thing, for she was loving him and loathing him at once.

"None of you were any good," she said, the flatness of her voice worse than any anger. "Old Jud. You. And now Steve. Well, it's a closed book. I wonder if you deserved this much, Mal?"

"I wonder," he said. "Good-by, Jessie."

He closed the door after her and heard her footsteps along the thin carpeting of the hallway. He waited till her footsteps faded and afterward let more minutes trickle by; he gave her that much time. Then he picked his hat from the bed and went down the stairs. Upon the boardwalk, he looked up at the house on the hill; the house was dark. He stood keening the night, trying to fathom how far the news had spread. He went along the street toward the jail.

Purvis's office, at the front of the building, was lighted, and Purvis was squeezed down in a chair behind his desk. Surprise took hold of the deputy when Conroy walked in, and he tried hard to pull himself from the chair, but Conroy's eyes nailed him there.

Conroy said, "So you didn't want me to know about Steve."

"Hell," Purvis said, "what was a man to do?"

Conroy said, "Have you heard? Beecham's dead."

Purvis laid his hands on the desk, palms down, and fear turned him old. "They'll be coming now," he said. He whispered it.

"You could move him to the county seat."

Purvis shook his head. "Too late for that."

"Too late? You mean you don't want to try; you don't want them howling for *your* hide!"

Purvis mustered defiance. "It adds up to choosing between a Conroy and a Beecham."

Conroy got his gun out then, his anger brittle. He got it out with one deft motion, and he saw Purvis's face grow frantic as he made a slovenly try for his own gun, but the edge of difference gave Conroy time to spare. He took a lunging step forward and laid his gun across the crown of Purvis's hat, and Purvis let out a sigh and slumped forward over the desk.

The key ring lay there, plain to see. Conroy picked it up and bent to blow out the lamp upon the desk, and then he was in the cell corridor, calling Steve's name again.

Steve said, "Here!" and Conroy got the key into the lock. Steve moved out, his fingers touching his brother's arm.

"Beecham's dead," Conroy said.

They groped through the office and out of the building, and Conroy got

Steve's elbow. "This way," he said and urged Steve into the weedy lot.

They came along a back alley; they stumbled in the darkness, and once Conroy paused, his whole body listening. The town's voice was a growing rumble.

Steve said shakily, "The news has got around, eh?"

Conroy said, "Here," and edged Steve between two buildings, and when they emerged upon the boardwalk, Conroy could have shied a rock and hit his hitched horse. He crossed rapidly to the animal; along the street men moved restlessly, some heading into the saloons, some stumbling from them. Conroy got into the saddle.

"Up behind me!" he ordered.

Steve looked at the hitchrails. "I can get a horse."

"Up behind me!" Conroy ordered again, and Steve obeyed.

Conroy swung the horse and someone shouted, the cry incoherent, and a gun barked. Conroy took to the shadows between two buildings, and the voice behind him was multiplied; boots beat in the darkness and the town was suddenly a kicked-over hornets' nest.

Steve said in Conroy's ear, "Damn it, we don't need to be double-burdened," but Conroy made no comment. He was picking his way out of the town, and soon they were upon the prairie and the night took them into its arms.

They thundered along, Conroy not looking back, and there was no talk between them, not with the wind of their own making to smash the words back into their mouths. They came through the night toward the Conroy place, the hills bulking ahead of them, the hills drawing nearer, and when at long last they galloped into the yard, the horse was lathered, he could run no more.

Conroy spilled down from the saddle and said, "Quick, kid. We'll rope out a couple of fresh mounts."

They stood listening then, both of them, wasting only a moment; but there was no thunder to the south, no sound of pursuit. Not yet.

Steve said, "Better rustle up some grub. No telling how long we'll have to stay holed up in the hills."

Conroy stared at him, measuring Steve, weighing Steve's inherent wildness against Steve's worship of him and wondering what might come of the balance between the two; but this was not yet the time for whatever talking must be done.

"Get those horses," Conroy said impatiently. "We won't bother about grub. There's a place I'm taking you to. You never knew about it. A cave up in the hills—"

The cave drove back into the face of a cliff, and a tilting ledge climbed to the black opening, but pine screened the face of the cliff and hid the cave from casual eyes. From the ledge, a man could look upon a sweep of country; and in the dawn light Conroy could see the morning smoke lifting above Arrowhead in the far distance. He stood here blinking. He had discarded his hat and gun belt and boots before bedding down upon his saddle blanket in the last darkness; below, in the timber, his hobbled horse grazed.

He stood and saw Jessie come riding up through the timber.

He watched while she dismounted and climbed the ledge toward him; he saw the supple grace of her, and all the piled-up years of longing smote

him, but his face showed none of this; his face was serene. She wore a divided riding-skirt today and a blouse, and she had a gun belted about her waist. She came to a stand before him, panting from the exertion of the climb; she looked at him with surprise in her eyes, and he thought, *She's wondering why I didn't try to duck out of sight.*

Then she said, "You're very, very sure of me, aren't you, Mal?"

He hadn't been sure how angry she was until she spoke. She had the judge's own temper, but this was a woman's anger.

She said, "When they told me last night that you'd taken Steve out of jail, I tried putting myself in your place. Not many people know about this cave, Mal."

"You and I knew about it," he said softly.

She said, "I gave you a chance to ride out, but I didn't owe Steve anything. Yes, blood's thicker than water, and maybe I should have known you'd take him with you. But Lew Beecham was my dad. Can you understand how much I hate you this morning?"

He saw now that grief as well as anger was in her, and he wanted to say something that would wipe those things out of her eyes, but he stood inarticulate. How could a man make words count when he dealt in intangibles and in the difference that five years made?

She took the gun from her holster with a quick, angry gesture and leveled it at him. "Pete Purvis is coming with a posse," she said. "I told him where I thought you could be found, but I started out ahead of him. Do you understand? I wanted to be the one to hand both you and Steve over to him and the posse!"

He looked out through the screening pine, and in the vastness between here and Arrowhead he saw the lifting dust plume; he made his measurement of time and space, and he said calmly, "Are you very sure you want it to be this way, Jessie?"

She stared at him long and intently, and he could feel the struggle that raged within her, but the answer had to be her own. That was the most important thing. He waited out this breathless moment and saw the gun sag and fall from her fingers; and the tears came then.

"Hurry, Mal," she said. "For God's sake hurry! You've still got time. I've always been this kind of fool about you. Take Steve with you. I can't stop either one of you."

"Steve's gone," he said.

"Gone?" She lifted her face; her eyes were incredulous.

"To the county seat to surrender to county law."

She sat down heavily upon a nearby rock. She said, "You mean he's gone of his own free will?"

"I talked him into it," he said. "I brought him here last night and spent till nearly morning making him see it. All I wanted was to keep him from hanging. He had that much coming to him, Jessie. Lew Beecham drew on him first."

"But I thought—" she murmured.

Now he had his last taste of bitterness. "You all thought wrong," he said. "You and Steve and Pete Purvis and the rest of the town. You thought I rode back the same man who rode away. But I had five years to see what being a Conroy got a man. The worst thing I could have done for Steve would have been to let him get away."

She said dazedly, "But when you

came back, after you'd made that threat against Dad—"

"I came back to make my peace with him, but I was too late." He paused. He said, "My own dad wasn't much. He let us run wild while he sucked at a jug or ran an iron on his neighbors' cattle. But he had one piece of wisdom, and he passed it on to me: If you lose a needle, you've got to look in the haystack where you lost it."

She said slowly, "I think I understand," and her face was desperately eager.

He said, "I came back to look for the needle I lost. If I'd not talked Steve into surrendering himself, I'd have thrown away any chance the Conroys have for making themselves better than old Jud. And I'd have thrown away my chance with you. Or is that needle lost for good?"

She came to her feet and moved to him. She came into his arms unbidden and pressed against him. She said, "If there's anything still lost, we'll find it together."

He put his arms around her and looked over her shoulder at the dust plume raised by the posse, but he looked without seeing; he had done the last running he would ever have to do. . . .

CHOUSED WORDS

A Western Quiz

IF YOU WERE RIDING HERD on a Western dictionary and had a stampede, the result might be something like the situation below. It's up to you to dab a loop on these alphabetical critters and put 'em back in shape. It is possible to put together at least 18 good Western words from the letters in this scramble. In making a word, though, you cannot use any letter more times than it appears in the scramble, thus, no word can contain more than one O or more than two R's. Proper names don't count, and you cannot score simply by making a plural. Go to it—a total score of 12 words is average, 13-15 good, 16 or more excellent. Answers on page 124.

SCARS

ACROSS THE EMBERS *of a dying fire one man tells another of a thing grown on his memory like a callus — a thing that goes deeper than bullet scars. First publication anywhere.*

By Theodore Sturgeon

THERE is a time when a thing in the mind is a heavy thing to carry, and then it must be put down. But such is its nature that it cannot be set on a rock or shouldered off on to the fork of a tree, like a heavy pack. There is only one thing shaped to receive it, and that is another human mind. There is only one time when it can be done, and that is in a shared solitude. It cannot be done when a man is alone, and no man aloof in a crowd ever does it.

Riding fence gives a man this special solitude until his throat is full of it. It will come maybe two or three weeks out, with the days full of heat and gnats and the thrum of wire under the stretcher, and the night full of stars and silence. Sometimes in those nights a chunk will fall in the fire, or a wolf will howl, and just then a man might realize that his partner is awake too, and that a thing in his mind is growing and swelling and becoming heavy. If it gets to be heavy enough,

it is put down softly, like fine china, cushioned apart with thick strips of quiet.

That is why a wise foreman pairs his fence riders carefully. A man will tell things, sometimes, things grown into him like the calluses from his wire cutters, things as much a part of him, say, as a notched ear or bullet scars in his belly; and his hearer should be a man who will not mention them after sunup—perhaps not until after his partner is dead—perhaps never.

Kellet was a man who had calluses from wire cutters, and a notched ear, and old bullet scars low down on his belly. He's dead now. Powers never asked to hear about it. Powers was a good fence man and a good partner. They worked in silence, mostly, except for a grunt when a post-hole was deep enough, or "Here," when one of them handed over a tool. When they pitched for the night, there was no saying "You get the wood" or "Make the coffee." One or the other would just do it. Afterward they sat and smoked, and sometimes they talked, and sometimes they did not, and sometimes what they said was important to them, and sometimes it was not.

Kellet told about the ear while he was cooking one evening. Squatting to windward of the fire, he rolled the long-handled skillet deftly, found himself looking at it like a man suddenly studying the design of a ring he has worn for years.

"Was in a fight one time," he said.

Powers said, "Woman."

"Yup," said Kellet. "Got real sweet on a dressamaker in Kelso when I was a bucko like you. Used to eat there. Made good mulligan."

They were eating, some ten minutes later, when he continued. "'Long comes this other feller, had grease on his hair. He shore smelt purty."

"Mexican?"

"Easterner."

Powers's silence was contributory rather than receptive at this point.

"She said to come right in. Spoons him out what should be my seconds o' stew. Gets to gigglin' an' fussin' over him." He paused and chewed, and when the nutritious obstacle was out of the way, spat vehemently. "Reckon I cussed a little. Couldn't help m'self. Nex' thing you know, he's a-tellin' me what language not to use in front of a lady. We went round and round together an' that ended quick. See this ear?"

"Pulled a knife on you."

Kellet shook his big, seamed head. "Nup. She hit me a lick with the skillet. Tuk out part o' my ear. After, it tuk me the better part of an hour with tar soap to wash the last o' that hair grease offen my knuckles."

One bullet made the holes in his stomach, Kellet told Powers laconically while they were having a dip in a cold stream one afternoon.

"Carried a leetle pot-belly in them days," said Kellet. "Bullet went in one side and out t'other. I figgered fer a while they might's well rack me, stick me, bleed me, an' smoke me fer fall. But I made it. Shore lost that pot-belly in th' gov'ment hospital, though. They wouldn't feed me but custards an' like that. My plumbin' was all mixed up an' cross-connected.

"Feller in th' next bed died one night. They used t' wake us up 'fore daybreak with breakfast. He had prunes. I shore wanted them prunes. When I see he don't need 'em I ate 'em. Figgered nobody had to know." He chuckled.

Later, when they were dressed and mounted and following the fence, he added, "They found th' prune stones in m' bandages."

But it was at night that Kellet told the other thing, the thing that grew on like a callus and went deeper than bullet scars.

Powers had been talking, for a change. Women. "They always got a out," he complained. He put an elbow out of his sleeping-bag and leaned on it. Affecting a gravelly soprano, he said, "I'd like you better, George, if you were a gentleman."

He pulled in the elbow and lay down with an eloquent thump. "I know whut a gentleman is. It's whatever in the world you caln't be, not if you sprouted wings and wore a hello. *I* never seen one. I mean, I never seen a man yet where *some* woman, *some* time, couldn' tell him to ack like he was one."

The fire burned bright, and after a while it burned low. "I'm one," said Kellet.

Powers then felt that thing, that heavy growth of memory. He said nothing. He was awake, and he knew that somehow Kellet knew it.

Kellet said. "Know the Pushmataha country? Nuh—you wouldn't. Crick up there called Kiamichi. Quit a outfit up Winding Stair way and was driftin'. Come up over this little rise and was well down t'ord th' crick when I see somethin' flash in the water. It's a woman in there. I pulled up pronto. I was that startled. She was mother-nekkid.

"Up she goes on t'other side 'til she's about knee-deep, an' shakes back her hair, and then she sees me. Makes a dive fer th' bank, slips, I reckon. Anyway, down she goes an' lays still.

"I tell you, man, I felt real bad. I don't like to cause a lady no upset. I'd as soon wheeled back an' fergot the whole thing. But what was I goin' to do—let her drown? Mebbe she was hurt.

"I hightailed right down there. Figgered she druther be alive an' embarrassed than at peace an' dead.

"She was hurt all right. Hit her head. Was a homestead downstream a hunderd yards. Picked her up—she didn' weigh no more'n a buffalo calf—an' toted her down there. Yipped, but there wasn't no one around. Went in, found a bed, an' put her on it. Left her, whistled up my cayuse, an' got to my saddlebags. When I got back she was bleedin' pretty bad. Found a towel fer under her head. Washed the cut with whisky. Four-five inches long under the edge of her hair. She had that hair that's black, but blue when the sun's on it."

He was quiet for a long time. Powers found his pipe, filled it, rose, got a coal from the dying fire, lit up, and went back to his bedroll. He said nothing.

When he was ready, Kellet said, "She was alive, but out cold. I didn't know what the hell to do. The bleedin' stopped after a while, but I didn't know whether to rub her wrists or stand on m' head. I ain't no doctor. Finally I just set there near her to wait. Mebbe she'd wake up, mebbe somebuddy'd come. Mebbe I'd have my poke full o' trouble if somebuddy did come—I knowed that. But what was I goin' to do—ride off?

"When it got dark two-three hours later I got up an' lit a tallow-fat lamp an' made some coffee. Used my own Arbuckle. 'Bout got it brewed, heard a funny kind of squeak from t'other

room. She's settin' bolt-upright lookin' at me through th' door, clutchin' the blanket to her so hard she like to push it through to t'other side, an' makin' her eyes round's a hitchin'-ring. Went to her an' she squeaked ag'in an' scrambled away off into the corner an' tole me not to touch her.

"Said, 'I won't, ma'am. Yo're hurt. You better take it easy.'

" 'Who are you?' she says. 'What you doin' here?' she says.

"I tol' her my name, says, 'Look, now, yo're bleedin' ag'in. Just you lie down, now, an' let me fix it.'

"I don't know as she trusted me or she got faint. Anyway down she went, an' I put a cold cloth on the cut. She says, 'What happened?'

"Tole her, best I could. Up she comes ag'in. 'I was bathin'!' she says. 'I didn't have no–' and she don't get no further'n that, but squeaks some more.

"I says, straight out, 'Ma'am, you fell an' hurt yore head. I don't recall a thing but that. I couldn't do nought but what I did. Reckon it was sort of my fault. I don't mean you no harm. Soon's you git some help I c'n leave. Ain't you got no menfolks?'

"That quieted her down. She tole me about herself. She was homesteadin'. Had pre-emption rights an' eighteen months left t' finish th' term. Husband killed in a rock-slide. Swore to him she'd hold th' land. Didn' know what she'd do after, but spang shore she was a-goin' to do that first. Lot o' spunk."

Kellet was quiet again. The loom of the moon took black from the sky and gave it to the eastward ridge. Powers's pipe gurgled suddenly.

"Neighbor fourteen mile downstream was burned out the winter before. Feller eight mile t'other way gone up to Winding Stair for a round-up, taken his wife. Be gone another two months, mebbe. This little gal sweat out corn and peas fer dryin', had 'taters put by. Nobuddy ever come near, almost. Hot day, she just naturally bathed in th' crick.

"Asked her what about drifters like me, but mebbe gunmen. She reached under th' bed, drug out a derringer. Says, 'This's for sech trash.' An' a leetle pointy knife. 'This's for me,' she says, just like that. I tol' her to keep both of 'em by her. Was that sorry for her, liked her grit so, I felt half sick with it.

"Was goin' to turn in outside, by the shed. After we talked some an' I made her up some johnny-cake, she said I c'd bunk in th' kitchen if I wanted. Tol' her to lock her door. She locked it. Big wooden bar. I put down m' roll an' turned in."

The moon was a bead on the hill's haloed brow; a coronet, then a crown.

Powers put his pipe away.

"In th' mornin'," said Kellet, "she couldn't get up. I just naturally kicked th' door down when she didn't answer. Had a bad fever. Fast asleep an' wouldn't wake up but for a half minute, then she'd slide off ag'in. Set by her 'most all day, 'cept where I saw to my hoss an' fixed some vittles. Did for her like you would for a kid. Kept washin' her face with cold water. Never done nothin' like that before; didn't know much what to do, done the best I could.

"Afternoon, she talked for a hour or so, real wild. Mostly to her man, like he was settin' there 'stead o' me. He was a lucky feller. Be damned to you what she said– But I tuk to answerin' her oncet in a while, just 'Yes, honey,' when she got to callin' hard for him.

Man a full year dead, I don't think she really believed it, not all the way down. She said things to him like—like no woman ever thought to say to me. He was a lucky feller. Be damned to you what she said. Anyhow, when I answered thataway she'd talk quiet. If I didn't she'd jest call and call, an' git all roiled up, an' her head would bleed.

"Next day she was better, but weak's a starvelin' colt in a blowin' drought. Slept a lot. I found out where she'd been jerkin' venison, an' finished it up. Got some weeds outen her black-eye peas. Went back ever' now an' then to see she was all right. Remembered some red haw back over the ridge, rode over there and gathered some, fixed 'em to sun so's she'd have 'em fer dried-apple pie come winter.

"Four-five days went by like that. Got a deer one day, skinned it an' jerked it. Done some carpenterin' in th' shed an' th' house. Done what I could. Time I was fixin' the door to the kitchen I'd kicked down that first mornin', she lay a-watchin' me an' when I was done, she said I was good. 'Yo're good, Kellet,' she says. Don't sound like much to tell it. Was a whole lot."

Powers watched the moon rise and balance itself on the ridge, ready to float free. A single dead tree on the summit stood against it like a black-gloved hand held to a golden face.

Kellet said, "Just looka that ol' tree. So strong-lookin', an' so dead—"

When the moon was adrift, Kellet said, "Fixed that door with a new beam and good gudgeons. Man go to kick it down now'd have a job to do. She—"

Powers waited.

"—she never did use it. After she got well enough to get up an' around a bit, even. Just left it open. Mebbe she never thought about it. Mebbe she did, too. Nights, I'd stretch out in my bedroll, lay there, an' wait. Pret' soon she'd call out, 'Good night, Kellet. Sleep good, now.' Thing like that, that's worth a passel o' farmin' and carpenterin'—

"One night, ten-'leven days after I got there, woke up. She was cryin' there in th' dark in t'other room. I called out what's the matter. She didn't say. Just kept a-bawlin'. Figgered mebbe her head hurt her. Got up, went to th' door. Asked her if she's all right. She just keeps a-cryin'—not loud, mind, but cryin' hard. Thing like that makes a man feel all tore up.

"Went on in. Called her name. She patted the side o' th' bed. I set down. Put my hand on her face to see if she was gettin' the fever ag'in. Face was cool. Wet, too. She tuk my hand in her two an' held it hard up ag'in' her mouth. I didn't know she was so strong.

"Set there quiet for two-three minutes. Got m' hand loose. Says, 'What you bawlin' for, ma'am?'

"She says, 'It's good to have you here.'

"I stood up, says, 'You git back to yore rest now, ma'am.' Went back to my bed. She—"

There were minutes between the words, but no change in his voice when he continued.

"—cried mebbe a hour. Stopped sudden, an' altogether. Mebbe I slept after that, mebbe I didn't. Don't rightly recall.

"Next mornin' she's up bright an' early, fixin' chow. First time she's done it since she's hurt. Tole her, 'Whoa. Take it easy, ma'am. You don't want to tucker yoreself out.'

"She says, 'I coulda done this three

days ago.' Sounded mad. Don't rightly know which one of us she's mad at. Fixed a powerful good breakfast.

"That day seemed the same, but it was 'way differ'nt. Other days we mostly didn't talk nothin' but business—caterpillars in th' tomato vines, fix a hole in th' smoke shed, an' like that. This day we talked the same things. Difference was, we had t' try hard to keep the talk where it was. An' one more thing—didn't neither of us say one word 'bout any work that might have to get done—tomorrow.

"Midday, I gathered up what was mine, an' packed my saddlebags. Brought my hoss up to th' shed an' watered him an' saddled him. She didn't say nothin'. Didn't see her much, but knowed she's watchin' me from inside th' house.

"All done, went to pat my hoss once on th' neck. Hit him so hard he shied. Right surprised m'self.

"She come out then. She stood a-lookin' at me. Says, 'Good-by, Kellet. God bless you.'

"Says good-by to her. Then didn't neither of us move for a minute. She says, 'You think I'm a bad woman.'

"Says, 'No sech a damn thing, ma'am! You was a sick one, an' powerful lonesome. Yo're all right now.'

"She says, 'I'm all right. I'll be all right long as I live,' she says, 'thanks to you, Kellet. Kellet,' she says, 'you had to think for both of us, an' you did. Yo're a gentleman, Kellet,' she says.

"Mounted, then, an' rode off. On the rise, looked back, saw her still by the shed, lookin' after me. I waved m' hat. She didn't move. Rode on."

The night was a white night now, since the moon had shucked its buoyant gold for its traveling silver. Powers heard Kellet turn over, and knew he could speak now if he cared to. Somewhere a mouse screamed briefly under an owl's silent talons. Distantly, a coyote's hungry call built itself into the echoing loneliness.

Powers said, "So that's whut a gentleman is. A man thet c'n think fer two people when the time comes fer it?"

"Naw," drawled Kellet scornfully. "That's just what she come to believe because I never touched her."

Powers asked it, straight. "Why didn't you?"

A man will tell things, sometimes, things grown into him like the calluses from his wire cutters, things as much a part of him as, say, a notched ear or bullet scars in his belly; and his hearer should be a man who will not mention them after sunup—perhaps not until after his partner is dead—perhaps never.

Kellet said, "I cain't."

Answers to "Choused Words" Quiz

(See page 118)

Airtight	Kak	Reins
Cayuse	Paint	Rope
Chaps	Pinto	Sixgun
Chouse	Pony	Spur
Cinch	Range	Taps
Horse	Ranger	Tight

By EDWIN L. SABIN

THE VOW

An Original ZGWM Fact Feature

THE approach to the Yellowstone was being watched, in the summer of 1873, by the Sioux and Northern Cheyenne, jealous of trespass by white men. Orders forbidding straggling from camp or march were given to the Seventh Cavalry, forming the advance of an escort for a Northern Pacific survey expedition from the Missouri westward to the Yellowstone. But Doctor James Honzinger, the Seventh's baldheaded veterinary, and his companion amateur naturalist, Fort Rice sutler Mike Baliran, made a habit of little excursions, unarmed, to observe the plant life of the region.

So it came about that Arikara scouts with the march found their bullet-shot, arrow-riddled bodies in an interval of the advance up the valley of the Tongue River, in southeastern Montana. The old doctor lay in the trail partly stripped, his head smashed. The sutler lay a short distance to one side in the brush. Neither had been scalped.

The scouts said this was because the horse doctor was bald and the storekeeper's hair had been recently cropped and was no good. By the signs, it had been a small party of warriors. The arrows were Sioux. One warrior had killed the doctor, maybe the storekeeper, too. Honzinger, wounded, had ridden a little way before falling off, to be finished with a club. Baliran had crawled into the bushes and been killed there.

The murder of the two defenseless non-combatants roused the anger of officers and men. The two had been popular. Tom Custer, first lieutenant and a troop commander under his famous older brother, Lieutenant Colonel (Brevet Major General) George A. Custer of the rippling yellow hair, in particular had liked to quiz the doctor, a mild old German of considerable learning. He looked forward to settling the score.

Tom Custer had enlisted in 1861 as a private of volunteers, soon won a commission, and had received two Medals of Honor for single-handedly capturing two enemy battle flags. In his first exploit a pistol ball at point blank had entered his right cheek and come out under his left ear, but with face streaming blood he had charged on, snatched standard from color bearer, and galloped away with it.

He was slimmer than his brother, active, gamy, mettlesome. Sioux and Cheyenne called him Little Hair, the elder Custer being known among them as Long Yellow Hair. Little Hair was keen to avenge the doctor.

Itiomagaju—Rain-in-the-Face— of Sitting Bull's Sioux, got his name when at the age of ten he had a stand-up fight with a Cheyenne boy. The blood from his battered nose plashed in his

face like rain. One time, too, when a young man on his first war trail, he fought all day with his painted face to the enemy and the driving rain.

Ten years older than Tom Custer, he had grown up strong and burly, ambitious, but foolish with women. One of them whom he wished to impress wanted soldier brass buttons to sew on her shawl. He dogged the march of the Seventh until he got his chance.

The young woman was pleased with the present of brass buttons cut from the shabby blue blouse of the old doctor, but she soon taunted Rain with the way he had won them—if he was really a brave-heart, he could prove it in the Sun Dance.

He entered the Sun Dance held the next summer in the depths of the Sioux Standing Rock Reservation. He directed that the bone skewers be passed under the tough flesh and sinews over his kidneys. Anchored by a hide lariat to the tall center pole, faced about, he danced and tugged and strained for two days to tear free; he sang his warrior deeds, recited the killing of the fat horse doctor and the storekeeper—the bald head had been a fine mark for the stone mallet; the storekeeper was sick with an arrow through his back and had tried to buy his life with his hat!

"Lonesome" Charlie Reynolds, white scout, was in the frenzied crowd that watched Rain cavort. Knowing the Sioux tongue, he listened to Rain's bragging. Later he rode the seventy miles across country up to Fort Abraham Lincoln and reported the story to General Custer.

So, after more than a year, the secret was out. But how to arrest this Rain-in-the-Face, a notable warrior, off there among thousands of defiant Sioux? Reynolds's description of him was filed.

Late in December, word by courier from Standing Rock Agency said that Rain-in-the-Face was there with the throng to draw rations. Captain George Yates and eager Tom Custer, with a hundred troopers, were sent down through the snow and the sub-zero temperature to get him.

With Captain Yates and the bulk of the force stalled a little way out, Tom Custer took five troopers and stumped into the Agency store, jumbled with Indians blanketed from ankles to crown. He loafed there for three hours. Finally a burly Indian at the counter let his blanket slip from his face. *Rain!*

With a saunter and a leap, Custer fastened his slight frame to the broad back and pinioned the arms to prevent use of the Winchester in the blanket folds. The troopers bored in to help.

Rain struggled, yielded, gave Custer one fixed look of hate, and was hustled out to Captain Yates and his men, there to be hoisted upon a horse.

At Fort Lincoln he confessed his guilt to General Custer and a council of officers. He carried himself proudly, wearing death garb of black buffalo robe, black leggin's, and black feather. In the post guardhouse he was legironed to a civilian grain thief for safekeeping until trial in a federal court.

On an early-April night, thick with blizzard, friends of the thief broke the pair out through a hole made in the flimsy wall. A file severed the shackles, and Rain made off to rejoin the hostiles of Sitting Bull.

Shortly thereafter black old Isaiah, squawman with a Sioux wife, brought a piece of buffalo hide to Tom Custer at Lincoln. It showed a red-paint

heart.

Isaiah said, "My wife on visit with her people. She send this from Rain-in-Face. Rain say Little Hair treat him, high warrior, like a squaw. Some day he cut Little Hair's heart out and eat it."

Tom Custer, now a captain, ground the piece of hide under his boot heel.

A year passed. On May 17, 1876, the Seventh Cavalry—six hundred officers and men—rode out of Fort Lincoln to find Sitting Bull. Twenty thousand Sioux and Cheyenne were off their reservations, resolved to live as they pleased. Replying to orders to bring his people in to be counted, Sitting Bull had said, "Come and get me. I shall not run away."

On the march a curious thing happened. At noon camp, July 24, the headquarters flag, planted as customary, fell down twice, pointing to the rear. Heads wagged; men sobered.

Early the next morning, from a bluff top, Custer located the enemy camp. He decided to attack without delay, on three lines. He himself took five troops, including Tom Custer's company—a total force of about two hundred twenty-five men—and rode forward through the ridgy hills.

Down on the Little Big Horn, or Greasy Grass, River were fifteen thousand Sioux and Cheyennes in a camp stretching for three miles. It was a rich village, strong with three thousand well-armed fighting men, warriors and chiefs—Gall, Crazy Horse, Lame Deer, Crow King, Black Moon, Rain-in-the-Face, other notables.

The soldiers were seen to be few, and divided. Head War Chief Gall massed his counter attack upon Yellow Hair's men, cut off from help. At last, while the sun was yet high, there was only a small group of survivors, afoot and at bay on a short-grass knoll.

Gall gave a great rally shout. Crazy Horse echoed it. From front and flanks the charge was made.

Rain lashed his pony—it was his third—to be in the van. Through the dust and smoke he now saw Little Hair, of the bullet-scarred cheek, who had treated him, wearer of the Sun-Dance scars, like a squaw.

Little Hair, hatless, was on one knee in the sprawling line, pistol in hand, eyes bright and blue in sweat-scalded face. The pistol wavered in his tired hand as its black muzzle jetted flame.

Rain, bent low, felt his right leg twitch as his own pistol answered. He saw Little Hair sway backward. Pulling up short in the melee of shots and blows and shouts, he lurched off the saddle pad and, knife in hand, stooped over the limp body. A moment later he spat a piece of his trophy into the stern, mute face.

The charge had swept on. Rain managed to remount and rode after Gall, who galloped for the village, there to shout:

"Leave your lodges standing—we have killed them all."

Rain tore in, his lips bloody, his lifted right hand clutching his grisly prize. "See! I have kept my vow!"

He had paid a price. This night he would have joined in the victory dance, but Little Hair's pistol ball, bedded deep in his right leg above the knee, gnawed like a hot coal.

With his knife Rain dug in upon the track of the lead. The muscles baffled him. He slashed in from the under side, cutting the tendons, making himself forever a hobbler on crutches, useless as a warrior—not much better than a squaw indeed.

False Teeth Never Ring True

JUSTIN OTHER SMITH, *Apache's dead-shot dauber, dabs a loop on the puzzling problem of Dr. Dewlap and his Daring Dental Discovery. A ZGWM original.*

A "Paintin' Pistoleer" Yarn

IT TAKEN a jumpin' toothache to send Justin Other Smith down to the torture chamber where Dr. Sigmoid Grubb hung out his shingle. Smith is the young artist feller they call the Paintin' Pistoleer around Apache, on account of him being the champeen pistol-shot of Arizona Territory.

When he's sober, which ain't often, Doc Grubb is a fair-to-middlin' medico and dentist, with a barberin' and veterinary business on the side. Justin O. is plumb relieved when he finds Grubb's two-by-four office crowded with local citizens this Saturday afternoon, waiting to get their ailments treated. This is a shore sign that Doc is on the water wagon today.

The Paintin' Pistoleer is still wearin' his artist's smock, this molar starting to jump in his jaw whilst he is in the middle of doing an oil painting for a calendar-publishin' outfit back East someplace. Peering through the winder of Doc Grubb's office, which same is located in a shack next to the Bloated Goat Saloon, Justin O. sizes up how many customers are ahead of him.

He sees Hernia Groot, the banker's wife, who has been porely of late; Rimfire Cudd, the sheriff, whose rheumatix has put his trigger finger on the fritz. Then there is Dyspepsia Dan of the Feedbag Cafe, who has chronicle indigestion; and Sol Fishman of the O. K. Mercantile, who is just back from his honeymoon trip and is all tuckered out. Even old Chief Ache-in-the-Back of the Cheery-Cow Injun reservation is here, trying to hornswoggle the doctor into writin' him out a perscription

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

so's he can buy some firewater.

But when he steps inside, the Paintin' Pistoleer discovers he is mistaken about this crowd being here on account of Doc's sobriety.

Grubb is all bibbed an' tuckered out in his white jacket, with one of them stereoscopes danglin' from his ears to look official, but he's fishy-eyed and his nose is the color of a ripe radish, which same is signs Doc Grubb has been taking too many nips of the liver tonic he cooks up, said tonic packing the same wallop as Curly Bill Grane's forty-rod, but only costing two bits a gallon.

Well, right off Justin Other Smith sees what is behind this Saturday-afternoon gatherin' in the medico's office.

There is a stranger haranguin' the crowd. A sawed-off little galoot who must be around 70-odd, his head bald as a eggplant, with skin all shriveled up like a rooster's wattles. This stranger wears a brown derby hat and a green-checkered coat, and he's oratin' at the crowd hammer and tongues, as follows:

"One applecation of Doctor Dewlap's Daring Dental Discovery definitely deposits dazzling, description-defying nacheral teeth in my customers' mouths, regardless of age or sex," this gaffer is telling the folks. "Think what this boon means to sufferin' mankind! No more toothaches. No more sore gooms from ill-fittin' false teeth. No more dentist's bills. No more extractions, fillin's, crowns, bridgework, or inlays.

"Buy a trial-size can of my Dental Discovery for five dollars, ladies an' gents, an' dump yore dentures into the

discard forever and aye. Grow yoreself a new set of masticators and relive the pleasure of eatin' taffy an' corn on the cob. One applecation—"

Just then Doctor Dewlap spots the Paintin' Pistoleer, whose jaw is swole up like he's trying to chaw a cowboot, spurs and all.

"Aha!" this half-pint spellbinder sings out. "A customer in search of your services, Doctor Grubb. A handy specimen to demonstrate the efficacy of my scientific salve, folks."

Justin O. Smith ain't in ary mood for no sales talk just now, the way his molar is jumpin' down to his ankle joints and back again. He elbows his way through the crowd that's been listening gape-jawed to Doctor Dewlap's spiel, and climbs up into Grubb's barber chair which he uses when doubling in dentistry.

"If you ain't too intoxicated, Sig-mold," Justin O. mumbles pitiful-like, "take your tweezers and extract this tooth before it drives me loco."

Doc Grubb, his breath so charged with alcohol it'd a been plumb arsonous for him to have lit a cigar, he pries open Smith's mouth and has a squint at the offending molar. He clucks his tongue mournful-like. "I just (hic!) been named Apache's exclusive sales agent for Doctor Dewlap's Daring Dental Discovery, Justin O.," he hiccups. "I think this tooth has an accessed root, but I'll (hic!) extract it free of charge ifn you'll (hic!) let me treat it with this here salve the Doctor is peddlin'."

The Paintin' Pistoleer scowls at the bald-headed old codger, who has opened his tin can to show off some greasy stuff that looks and smells like rancid lard.

"All right, what's the deal?" Smith groans miserable. "If that dope kills pain, I'll buy a gross to begin with. I ain't had a decent night's sleep in over a week and I haven't got the time to run over to Tucson to see a real dentist."

Doc Grubb is too stewed to resent this insult to his professional ability.

"The idea of this (hic!) Daring Dental Discovery," Grubb says, "ish that it sprouts new teeth, Justin. I yank this molar and daub on some salve, and overnight it'll grow you a new one. No charge or your money back, I mean (hic!), a new tooth within twelve hours or satisfaction guaranteed (hic!)."

By now Smith is gettin' plumb impatient. Ifn he'd had his six-gun right now he would probably have ventilated Doc Grubb's ceiling.

"What kind of a swindle is this?" the Paintin' Pistoleer bellers. "Is this old fraud claiming he can grow new teeth with that patent-medicine goose grease? That's rediclious. He orter be tarred an' feathered an' run out of town on a railroad."

At this outburst, Doctor Dewlap looks pained and insulky. He cuffs back his brown derby and scowls fierce as a catamount.

"My Daring Dental Discovery is no hoax, sir!" he protests, drawing hisself up to his full four foot eight inches. "Folks can throw away their false teeth after rubbin' this preparation on their gooms. Inside of twelve hours they'll be sportin' a crop of new teeth as perty as mine. Witness, my skeptical friend."

With which Dewlap spreads open his mouth for the first time, to expose the most dazzling set of ivories Smith has seen in many a day. If Dewlap had been eating lickrish candy, that

smile would have looked like a couple octaves on a piano keyboard, at least.

"I am seventy-nine years old come April," Dewlap explains. "I lost my baby teeth at fourteen and my permanent teeth rotted out on me before I was twenty. I have devoted my life in my laboratory, wrestling with the problem of preventing toothlessness in the human oral cavity. At the age of three score years and ten—that's seventy—I perfected my Dental Discovery. You can see that for yoreself."

And Dewlap blinds the Paintin' Pistoleer with another grin.

"Them are right handsome tushes the Doctor's got," puts in Sheriff Cudd, who's practically a gummer hisself, having only two teeth that meet. "I reckon I'm game to plank down five bucks for a trial-size can o' that dope, Doctor."

Wellsir, Doc Dewlap is reachin' down into his little black bag for a can of his Dental Discovery, when he feels a Texas-sized sneeze coming on. He straightens up, shets his eyes, tilts back his head, wrinkles his nose like an accordeen, and then explodes in a sneeze which liken to blowed the cigar butts out of Grubb's cuspidor. Dewlap's derby hat pops straight up a foot and his ears flap like a rooster getting set to crow.

Something flies out of his mouth and lands on the carpet under the barber chair with a janglin' sound like a set of dishes spillin' off a shelf, and Doctor Dewlap stands there staring at said crockery with his eyes buggin' out like a tromped-on toad's.

Sheriff Cudd stares down at this set of false teeth which are grinnin' up at him, and then looks at Doctor Dewlap, whose lips have caved in so's you could have balanced a dime betweenst his nose and his chin. He's as toothless as a newborned baby!

The sheriff stuffs his five-dollar bill back into his levis and whips out his Colt .44, which same he jabs into Doc Dewlap's ribs.

"Smith was right, as usual!" bellers the sheriff, ory-eyed as a spooked steer. "You are a swindler and a faker, passin' off yore store teeth for a third set you claimed had roots. I'm lockin' you up in the 'Pache calaboose on a fragrancy charge, my quack friend, and we'll see how good you can chaw Stirrup County's grub for the next sixty days!"

Wellsir, Doctor Dewlap is such a comical-looking cuss with his mouth all sucked in like the puckerin' string of a grain bag that Justin O. Smith forgets his toothache and busts out laughin'. Everybody else in the office, though, look fitten to be tied, and old Chief Ache-in-the-Back, he starts whettin' his scalpin' knife on his palm.

"One m-moment, gentsh!" Doctor Dewlap lisps, panic-struck. "My shneeze jusht now wath providential. It fortheth me to prove my verathity and the worth of my product. If you pleash—"

Dewlap gently pushes the sheriff's hogleg out of his belly button and stoops down to recover his choppers, which he dusts off and pops back in his head. A minute before, everybody in Grubb's office had their purses out, fixing to buy a can of the Dental Discovery before the supply give out. Now they're glowerin' at the peddler like they're fixin' to lynch him.

"You got ary sportin' blood in you, Sheriff?" Dewlap asks, clattering his store teeth castenets before they set right. "Are you game to gamble five bucks against my proving, conclusive

and irrevokable, that my Daring Dental Discovery is exactly as I guarantee it?"

Cudd gnashes his two teeth together like a rabbit dawg.

"Meanin' what?" he says, giving the tin star on his gallus strap a snap. "You better make this good, Doctor Quack Dewlap, if you aim to avoid bein' jailed by Justice o' the Peaces Plato X. Scrounge. Apache is danged rough on four-flushin' city slickers who try to out-fox this community."

Doctor Dewlap, he waits until a few more folks crowd into Grubb's office to find out what the excitement is all about. There is Hector Coddlewort and Spetunia Pirtle, and Curly Bill Grane, the bartender next door, and a few Sacatone miners and north-county cowhands who are in town for their Saturday-night spree.

"I mean this, Sheriff," Doctor Dewlap says. "I will medicate my toothless gooms with this Dental Discovery, in the presence of all these estimable citizens. My salve contains secret ingredients which vitalize the dormant oral tissues, calcifying the root sockets, and starting life into the tooth buds which every human bean is endowed with at birth for a third set o' teeth."

Sheriff Cudd waves his gun menacing-like. "To hell with this palaver," he hollers. "What's the sportin' proposition you mentioned?"

Dewlap removes his false teeth and takes the lid off his can of Dental Discovery.

"I will now give mythelf a treatment," he says, "and by eight o'clock tomorrow morning, I will have a full thet of teeth to dithplay to thith thkeptical community: incithors, bicuthpids, molarth, and mebbe a thet of withdom teeth to boot. I am willing to wager cold cash at oddth of five to one, Sheriff, that my magic preparation can bring thith miracle to path. Do I hear any takerth among you gambling men?"

Well, every galoot in the house, except the Paintin' Pistoleer, start clawin' for their pocketbooks. Even old Ache-in-the-Back has his wampum belt out. The deal seems to be that if Doctor Dewlap's dope produces him a set of genu-wine teeth, roots and all, by tomorrow mornin', the sheriff will turn him loose.

On the other hand, if Dewlap is still a gummer tomorrow morning, Lawyer Scrounge will sentence him to 60 days in the calaboose and confiscate his bag full of Daring Dental Discovery in the bargain. It looks like Dewlap's fish is fried, for shore.

Well, inside of five minutes Dewlap has all the bets he can handle, at five-to-one odds. Jim Groot is called over from the Stockman's Bank to act as stakes holder, Dewlap ponying up five dollars for every one bet agin him, and not trusting nobody else in town except a banker to act as go-between for him.

There's a big crowd of cowhands and miners and town folks mulling around the front of Doc Grubb's shack by now, wanting to get in on this chance to make some sure money, on account of any damned fool knows that a man can't sprout a third set of teeth overnight. As Plato X. Scrounge p'ints out, it's ag'in the established by-laws of Nature.

Dewlap finally calls a stop to the bettin', even though he still has a wad of greenbacks in his wallet.

"It ain't fair to bet on a shore thing, friends," he applegizes. "I can't take your money like this, knowing I'll win.

Therefore, all further bets are null, void, and called off."

When the roar of disappointment dies down from them that ain't got an ante in the kitty, Doctor Dewlap turns to the Paintin' Pistoleer and says, his lips slobbering this grease he's rubbed on his naked gums, "Theeing as how you were here to witneth my thneeth and thubthequent humiliation, thtranger, I'll let you in on a bet up to and including ten buckth. It'll win you fifty buckth or I go to jail."

But Justin O. Smith, he rubs his swoled-up jaw and says, "I never bet on another man's shore thing, thanks just the same. But I'll be on hand tomorrow mornin' to see if you come through with that third set of teeth, you can be sure of that."

Well, everybody looks on while Doctor Dewlap rubs on some more of his Dental Discovery. Doc Grubb is doin' some mental arithmetic, figgering up the fortune he's going to make. As exclusive retail agent for Doctor Dewlap's Daring Dental Discovery, he'll make a margin of profit that will keep him in rotgut whisky for mohths to come. Besides which, he'll grow himself a new set of teeth to boot, so he can enjoy corn on the cob ag'in.

"Thay, thtranger!" lisps Doctor Dewlap, staring at the Painted Pistoleer real sharp-like, "ain't I theen you before thomewhere? On the theatrical thtage, mebbe?"

Justin O. shrugs, plumb hopeless about his molar by now.

"Could be," he moans. "Four-five summers back, I done a tour of one-night stands through Alabama with my trick sharp-shooting act. I was billed as the Paintin' Pistoleer. That's the only stage I ever been on, outside of the Wells-Fargo variety."

Well, Dewlap thinks that over while he and Jim Groot walk over to the Stockman's Bank to deposit the stake money that's been bet. Doc Grubb yanks the Paintin' Pistoleer's sore tooth for him, the roots of which went plumb down to his belly it seemed like, and refused to take a cent for his work.

"I'll be rich as Mica tomorrow," Grubb brags. "Hell, Justin—he *knows* he'll have a third set of teeth by tomorrow mornin', or else he'll wind up bustin' rocks on the county road."

Sheriff Cudd ain't so optimistic. He has a bet of ten bucks at five-to-one odds to pertect, so he refuses to let Doctor Dewlap sashay back to his room in the Cowboy's Comfort Hotel, Guaranteed Bugless. Nosiree, Cudd is out to protect his investment. He claps Dewlap into a cell at the county jail, and spreads his bedroll in front of the bullpen door to make shore Dewlap don't try to bust jail durin' the night.

Late that evenin', the Paintin' Pistoleer goes over to the Bloated Goat Saloon for his usual nightcap, but this time he passes up buttermilk for a snort of Blue Bagpipe Scotch to ease the pain in his sore jaw. The tooth Doc Grubb extracted and now has on his watch chain looked liken it belonged to a bull elephant instead of a human bean.

"I'm afraid we're goin' to win our bets, Smith," says Curly Bill Grane, who regrets havin' fossed his false teeth into the stove earlier this evening. "When Dyspepsia Dan tooken Dewlap's supper over to the jail tonight, there warn't a sign of ary teeth sproutin' from his gooms. And he sent out to Sol Fishman's store at seven o'clock, for one o' them baby teethin'-rings."

Well, that was good news to all the hombres who had their own teeth and a five-to-one bet with the Doctor. But to Curly Bill and Sol Fishman and the other folks who had trouble with their store tushes, it was bad news. They all had high hopes of the Darin' Dental Discovery pannin' out color.

"Of course Dewlap will lose his bets," Smith tells the boys. "That cracked pot is a fraud forty ways from the jack. He hadn't counted on bein' clapped in the hoosegow. Now he can't skip town durin' the night like he had planned to do."

Well, next morning there was quite a crowd bunched around the jail before Sheriff Rimfire Cudd woken up. Cudd crawls out of his bed in front of the bull-pen door and goes in to unlock Doc Dewlap's cell.

Dewlap follers him outdoors, his brown derby and green-checkered coat showin' he'd slept in 'em. The little runt steps out on the jail porch and sucks his lungs full of Arizona air. He is totin' his black bag full of Dental Discovery, and he is grinning from ear to ear. It warn't no toothless grin, neither! Doc Dewlap has a set of full-growed teeth that put Samanthie Coddlewort's new whitewashed picket fence to shame.

"Citizens of Apache," he tells the crowd, "as you can see, I have wiped the blot from my estanchion. My honor has been proved. Durin' the night, the forces of Nature, augmented by my magical preparation—which will go on sale at ten dollars a can instead of five, by the way—has endowed me with this beautiful set of ivories. If Mr. Groot will hand me the stakes I will be on my way to New Mexico—"

Well, Dewlap was a-gallopin' a mite too fast for his harness to keep up with him. Apache folks weren't a'hint the door when the brains was passed out, nosiree. Lawyer Scrounge clears his throat, clamps on his nose glasses and sings out mad as a banty rooster:

"One moment, my learned friend. You are perpetratin' a hoax of the most calumnious nature on this community, to-wit: them are false teeth yo're foistin' off as real ones. They don't ring true. As legal counsel for Stirrup County *et ux*, I plan to slap a writ o' halibut corpuscles on you an' bind you over to the grand jury—"

Wellsir, Doc Dewlap don't bat an eyelash at this. He crooks his trigger finger to Doc Grubb.

"As the only qualified medical practitioner in this city, my fellow disciple of Hippocrates, I grant you the honor of making an unprejudiced professional examination o' my teeth," he tells Grubb.

Doc Grubb overlooks the names Dewlap has called him and pries open the runt's mouth like he's fixin' to drench a colicky heifer with liniment. He gives Dewlap's front tusks a yank with his thumb and fingers, and finally turns to the crowd and says smuglike:

"Amigos, this may seem fantastic an' incredible, but so help me it's the gospel truth. These ain't artificial fangs. The Doctor has growed hisself a real set of chin china overnight, liken he ga'ranteed to do. As sole agent for the sale of his Dental Discovery may I announce that I will sacrifice my stock at fifteen dollars a can—"

The Paintin' Pistoleer elbows forward at that, suspecting that mebbe Grubb's medical testimony has been unduly influenced by commercial considerations of his own. He taken a pair of blacksmith's pliers from his pocket,

and before Doctor Dewlap knows what's happened, Smith clamps onto a front tooth and gives it a hard, quick yank.

Dewlap bawls like he's been stirrup-drug through a cactus patch, and his grin looks like something a kid carves into a punkin to make a Hallowe'en jack-o-lantern. Every galoot in the crowd sees the bloody tooth that Smith has now got in his pair of pliers.

"I apologize most contritely, Doctor Dewlap," Justin O. Smith says, looking flabbergasted. "You win. This here is a real tooth, and I know there wasn't a tooth growing there yesterday."

Dewlap has tears in his eyes and his gum is bleeding fierce, but he don't appear to bear Smith no ill will, it seems.

"One dab of my Dental Discovery will grow me a replacement, my diehard skeptic," he chuckles. "And now, to show Apache that I bear you no grudge, I am hereby setting up you folks to a round of drinks at the Bloated Goat."

With which he tosses Curly Bill Grane a $50 bill, and hands his stock of Dental Discovery medicine over to Sigmoid Grubb; likewise for free.

Half of the crowd stampedes over to the Bloated Goat to get their free drink, while the rest of the mob swarms around Doc Grubb, shelling out $15 apiece in return for a can of the Dental Discovery. Sol Fishman lights a shuck over to his O. K. Mercantile and starts workin' on a poster advertising a special sale on toothbrushes, Sunday only, with a discount to folks who ain't got any teeth prior to usin' the Dental Discovery.

During all this cornfusion, banker Jim Groot takes Doctor Dewlap over to the Stockman's Bank, which is of course closed on account of it being Sunday morning, and goes inside to pay off Dewlap the gamblin' stakes he's kept overnight in his vault.

Well, it's about an hour later when the Paintin' Pistoleer, looking out of the winder of his studio upstairs over the Longhorn Saddle Shop, happens to notice that Groot has left the door of the Stockman's Bank hangin' wide open.

Smith lights a shuck over to the bank to padlock the door, but he discovers something that sets Apache on its ear like a cyclone had struck. Jim Groot is laid out inside his open vault with a lump the size of a goose aig over his left ear, and it's plain to see that this Dewlap has not only tooken his gamblin' stakes, but has cleaned out the Stockman's Bank of all the loose dinero he can lay hands on.

Smith hollers for Rimfire Cudd, who organizes a posse to track down the missing Dewlap. They find where Dewlap had a bronc hitched out in the mesquites behind the bank, and the trail leads off toward the Sacatones and the Mexican border.

Jim Groot revives in Grubb's office but he don't remember nothin' except that Dewlap follered him into the vault. Rimfire Cudd's posse is out all day, but they come back late at night empty-handed, reportin' that they lost Dewlap's sign in a crick over by Chewie Cudd's sheep camp.

Apache has been swindled, that's plain to see. The town pounces on Doc Grubb like a ton of rocks and gets back the absorbent prices they'd paid him for the Dental Discovery, which the womenfolks find out is good for nothin' but greasin' skillets with. Sol

Fishman has to refund the dinero he made on his toothbrush sale. Needles to say, durin' the next week nobody growed any teeth that had used Dewlap's magic salve. The stuff soon become a drudge on the market.

Nobody does anything about this disgrace, except the Paintin' Pistoleer. He does some powerful thinkin', and finally shoves aside his regular work and gets busy paintin' a picture which is a spittin' image of the missing Doctor Dewlap, brown derby and all. He mails this picture back East somewhere, along with a letter explaining why he is doing same.

Nothing happens for a couple of months, and Apache has just about forgot its disgrace when a telegram comes to Lew Pirtle's office addressed to Justin Other Smith.

Lew Pirtle, of course, spreads the news before Justin O. has a chance to tell folks what was in this telegram. It's from the Texas Rangers headquarters over in Austin, and it says that Doctor Dewlap was captured red-handed robbing a bank in San Antonio, and has been sent up for a long term for swindling honest cowfolks up and down the Border with his fake Dental Discovery.

Furthermore, the money which was stole from the Apache bank has been recovered and is being returned by Wells-Fargo Express to Jim Groot. Accordin' to this telegram, Justin O. Smith was responsible for Dewlap's capture, and will git himself a handsome reward for same.

"It was simple," Smith tells the boys in at the Bloated Goat Saloon. "I just painted Dewlap's portrait and mailed it to a firm in St. Louis which deals in dental supplies—drills, forceps, and such-like. They had duplicates printed up and distributed to every dentist in the country. Sooner or later, Dewlap would pull his swindle again, I figgered. And he did—in San Antone. The Rangers was waitin' for him when he had the local banker open his vault on a Sunday morning, to pay off the bets Dewlap had made with the San Antone folks."

Well, the bank money showed up, all right, and Apache thought that was the end of it. But it turned out it wasn't, not by a long sight. It was about a couple weeks after the Texas Rangers dabbed their loop on Doctor Dewlap that Justin O. Smith was alone one night in his studio, paintin' a magazine cover showing Kit Carson standin' off the redskins at 'Dobe Walls.

He was daubin' away at his canvas, when all of a sudden! his studio door busted open and there on the threshold stood Doctor Dewlap, derby hat and all. His teeth was bared like a snarlin' bobcat and he had a six-gun in his fist that looked to Justin O. like the bar'l of a cannon.

"Reckon you know why I'm back, Smith," Dewlap growls. "Or did you figger I was roostin' in a Texas penintentiary?"

Smith lays down his paint brushes and shakes his head.

"No-o, Doc," he admits, "I been expectin' you to show up for your revenge. You aim to kill me, so go ahead and get it over with. Make yore first shot count, is all I ask."

But Doc Dewlap shakes his head, grinning nasty-like.

"Oh no you don't, Smith!" he jeers. "I shoot you here in your studio, the whole town would hear the shot and come runnin' to investigate. No sir, you and me are takin' a *pasear* out in the desert for a few miles, and then

I'm blastin' you to kingdom-come. If it hadn't been for that paintin' you made, I'd have been a millionaire in a few years peddlin' that rendered bacon grease I called my Dental Discovery."

Smith starts shakin' like a cat spittin' peach seeds, like he's scairt silly. But he's got guts. He don't start whimperin' for mercy.

"All right, Doctor," he agrees meek-like. "I'll git my hat and come along with you peaceable. I know my jig is up."

Dewlap comes over real fast as Smith starts to shuck off his artist's smock, because he's heard of Smith's rep as a six-gun expert and he's taking no chances. But the Pistoleer ain't wearing no gun belt. He never goes heeled when he's working.

Dewlap keeps his big .45 trained on the artist as Smith walks over to where his ten-gallon Stetson is hangin' on a peg beside the looking-glass he uses to shave with every mornin'. In that mirror, Smith sees where Dewlap has edged over to block the alley winder, makin' sure Smith won't try a getaway. His big gun is at full cock and is aimed at Smith's back.

Well, the Paintin' Pistoleer reaches for his hat, but his hand goes up under the brim of the John B. and lays a holt of his famous .32 Colt on a .45 frame, which is hanging on that same peg. Without turnin' around, Smith lifts the gun up, the muzzle holding up the sombrero crown so that Dewlap don't see nothing out of the ordinary is going on.

Checking Dewlap's location in the looking-glass, Smith tilts his Colt six-gun back acrost his shoulder and squeezes the trigger, shootin' right through his Stetson.

Doc Dewlap squalls like he's been hit by lightnin' and makes a grab for his right wrist, which same has been drilled by Justin O.'s bullet. His gun drops to the floor and Dewlap is too dazed to reach for it when Smith puts on his hat and turns around, holding his smoking hogleg ready for business.

"A tooth for a tooth," he quotes. "You must have forgotten seeing me on the vaudeville circuit four-five years back with my target-shootin' act. Shootin' over my back with a mirror was my favorite stunt with the theater audiences."

Well, the boys was roundsiding over at the Bloated Goat barroom as usual when the batwings fanned open and Doctor Dewlap come stumblin' in, his wrist drippin' blood. He coughed his false teeth out on the floor when Justin O. Smith slapped him on the back to make him move off the threshold.

"A customer for Doc Grubb," Smith says. "Mr. Daniel Dewlap."

Sheriff Rimfire Cudd swallered his chaw of eatin' tobacco when he recognized Smith's prisoner.

"Doctor Dewlap!" he squawks. "How in hell did you manage to escape the Texas Rangers?"

Well, Doc Grubb come forward to take charge of doctorin' up Dewlap afore he bled to death. Grubb had a bone to pick with this swindler and judgin' from the yowls that come from the jail where Rimfire Cudd locked Dewlap up, the medico must have used bobwire for bandages.

The Paintin' Pistoleer waits until the sheriff and Grubb come back from the calaboose before explainin' what happened.

"This Doctor Dewlap you saw tonight wasn't the same hombre the Texas Rangers captured," he explains. "You see, Dewlap is one of identical

twin brothers. They've had a vaudeville jugglin' act for years. The only difference between them is that Daniel Dewlap, now reposing in our bastille, lost all his teeth early in life, whereas his twin, Donald Dewlap, still has all of his—with the exception of the incisor I extracted for him on the jail steps that Sunday morning. It was Donald whom the Texas Rangers captured robbing that bank in San Antone."

Well, things quieted down some while the Paintin' Pistoleer orders his usual glass of ice-cold buttermilk.

"The Dewlap twins got too old and shaky for juggling on the stage," Smith says, "so they thought up this Dental Discovery swindle. Daniel, the toothless one, would drift into a cowtown on a Saturday afternoon and give off with his sales talk, spoiling everything at the critical moment by sneezing out his false teeth.

"He'd collect a lot of bets and then retire to a hotel or rooming-house to wait for Sunday morning, when he'd guarantee to have growed a third set of teeth. Only sometime during the night, his twin brother Donald would secretly trade places with him. Donald would win the bets with his teeth as evidence. They always insisted on the local banker holding stakes, which meant the banker had to open up his vault on Sunday morning to pay him off. Donald would rob the bank and vamoose to rejoin Daniel. Simple, eh?"

Rimfire Cudd was the only jasper in the saloon who failed to savvy how Daniel and Donald Dewlap managed their switch, what with the sheriff guardin' the jail door all night, personal. But that was easy enough for the rest of the gang to understand. Cudd sleeps like a log with a buzz saw goin' through it, and all Donald Dewlap had to do was go through the sheriff's pants, chouse the jail keys, and trade places with his toothless twin in the cell.

"I've kicked myself plenty for not recognizin' Daniel as one of them twin jugglers, first time I laid eyes on him," the Paintin' Pistoleer says. "Especially when he tipped me off he had seen *me* someplace before. You see, I was doing my trick-shooting act with mirrors, on the same theater circuit with the Dewlap Twins' juggling routine, a few years before I come West for my health."

All of a sudden the Paintin' Pistoleer chokes on his iced buttermilk and claps a hand to his jaw.

"I got another bad toothache comin' on," he moans. "You'll have to excuse me, boys. I got to bolt a saddle on my hoss and make tracks for Tucson and look me up a dentist."

Dr. Sigmoid Grubb reaches in his coat and comes out with a can of Doctor Dewlap's Daring Dental Discovery.

"I got some dope here I'll sell you for two bucks," the medico volunteers generous, "which will fix up that toothache in a jiffy. One application—"

Nobody lifted a hand to interfere, not even the sheriff, while Justin Other Smith crammed that grease down Doc Grubb's gullet and poured buttermilk in on top of it.

On Gittin' Fed Up

By C. Wiles Hallock

You git fed up with night-herd shifts
And ridin' fence through blizzard-drifts;
The dogie-brandin' drives you mad,
And brandin' colts is twicet as bad;
It's wearin' on yore nerves to ride
A stumble-nag with jerky stride,
And sometimes wearin' on yore hide;
The frettin' chore of chasin' strays
Kin git you down in many ways;
And jest ask any seasoned waddy
How roundup drives kin irk a body;
A bawlin' steer yore soul embitters;
The senseless millin' of the critters
Kin cause acute and chronic jitters!

It takes a certain kind of savvy
To train and tend a top-grade cavvy;
A man don't dare git uncourageous
With hosses actin' up rampageous;
No matter what he thinks he knows,
A cavvy wrangler undergoes
Some highfalutin' griefs and woes!
You claim it gripes you to the bone
To be a dumb cow chaperon;
But bein' as you ain't no quitter,
You'll never be no sneak-committer;
You cuss yore fate, but still you stick,
And know—as long as you kin kick—
Yo're proud to be a saddle-hick!

JOHN MILLER'S HIRED MAN *"takes a day off" and rides with the Carney gang—into a disaster that foreshadows a bleak destiny.*

ESCAPE

By Frank Gruber

THE barn was one of the biggest in all Minnesota. The German farmers of the section prided themselves more on their barns than on their houses. And John Miller was, if not the most prosperous farmer of the community, one of the proudest.

There was a tiny room next to the horse stables in which the hired man, Harry Cummings, had a cot, a chair, and his few personal things. Not all of his belongings were in the little room. John Miller didn't know that, though.

Cummings was in the hayloft now, retrieving that part of his property which was not in his room. He burrowed deep in the hay, under the eaves, and brought out a bundle. His lean, tanned face was impassive as he unrolled the bundle. It developed into a linen coat, or duster, as it was called in the period, which was 1876.

But it wasn't the duster that was startling; a good many men wore them when traveling. It was what was inside the coat—two cartridge belts, each loop filled with a cartridge, plus two leather holsters and two well-oiled Frontier Model Colts, caliber .44.

John Miller would have been amazed

Copyright, 1939, by Short Stories, Inc.

to note the dexterity with which his hired man spun the cylinders of the guns, the proficiency with which he took out the removable parts, cleaned them, and put them back.

Satisfied, the hired man again rolled the guns into the linen duster. Then he walked over the pungent hay to the center of the barn, dropped to a sitting position, and slid to the floor ten feet below. When he stood on the floor he was a lean man, weighing around 160 pounds and standing five feet ten inches in height. His face was clean-shaven and showed strength. His eyes were blue—blue as water, but not as liquid or warm.

He came out of the barn, with the bundle under his arm. And then he stopped. A girl was approaching him, John Miller's daughter, Mary. She wore a plain but scrupulously clean house dress. Her blond hair was done up on her head, in the style of the day—yet not like it. Her hair, the hired man thought, looked like pulled taffy.

She was tall and slender. And calm. But her calmness always affected Harry Cummings otherwise. Things moved inside him; he had to fight to control the restlessness that gripped him every time he saw Mary Miller. It was that way now. He was very conscious of the bundle under his arm.

She said, "Father tells me you're taking off today."

He thought, *Haven't I put it across? Don't they believe I'm just going to New Ulm to drink some cool beer?* Aloud he said, "Just taking off a day now that the hay's in."

"You're going to New Ulm," she said, rather than asked. "I thought I might ride in with—"

"I don't know just where I'm going," he cut her off hurriedly, too hurriedly. "I'm meeting a friend in town. We might even go swimming—or fishing somewhere."

Her face was still calm. The disappointment in her tone was scarcely noticeable. "Oh, I didn't know. Well, it's all right. August is going in tomorrow I'll go with him. Have a good time—Harry."

"Thanks—I will. It's not so hot today." He looked at the sky and added inanely, "Maybe it'll rain."

She walked back toward the modest whitewashed house. He got his horse out of the stable, a big fine-looking animal. When he mounted and rode out toward the dusty road, Mary Miller was standing on the porch of the house. He nodded at her, but she made no response.

I wonder— he said to himself.

Well, it was the last time he'd see her. Probably the last time he'd see this country.

Down the road, August Miller, having reached the end of a furrow, was resting with his corn cultivator. He puffed at his corncob pipe and looked at Harry Cummings.

"The hired man's the lucky one around this farm," he said. "He can take a day off now and then."

"It's the first day I've had off in a month," said Harry Cummings.

"*Ja*, sure," said August Miller. "You're a good man. The old man likes you." August Miller resembled his sister only vaguely. He was of middle height, built along the general lines of a draft horse. He weighed 200 pounds and all of it was bone and muscle. He was blond and red-faced. The sun burned him, but did not tan. He had small eyes.

He smiled at the hired man and his eyes disappeared into tiny slits. "Don't

drink too much German beer," he said. It was meant to be jovial—and mean.

Harry Cummings rode on. It was three miles to New Ulm. He passed whitewashed farmhouses, big red barns, fields with growing things. It was a good, peaceful country. He liked it. He liked the German farmers. They were thrifty, hard-working. Honest.

In New Ulm he had a glass of cold beer in a German saloon. When he came out, Fletch Higgins was tying his horse next to Cummings's.

"Hello, Fletch," Cummings said.

Fletch was glad to see him. "Hello, Jim," he said. They shook hands. They had been close friends since 1862—14 years.

They made suitable comments about the weather, then mounted their horses and rode out of New Ulm, taking the east road. A mile out of town Bob and Jim Baker were lying on the grass beside the road, their horses grazing near by.

They shook hands all around. "We're to meet them in the woods, three miles this side of Northport," said Jim Baker.

"It's today then?" asked Fletch Higgins.

"Yeah," replied Jim Baker. "Frank's looked it all over. He figures we ought to do it about a quarter to three. He claims there'll be between thirty and fifty thousand. It's a rich country around here."

"These Dutch farmers salt it away," commented Bob Baker. He shook his head. "That squarehead, Krantz, almost starved me and Jim."

They mounted their horses and rode two abreast. They looked, except for their fine horseflesh, like farmhands going somewhere to make a day of it. They wore overalls and flannel shirts, work-worn shoes and floppy felt hats. Jim Baker had even obtained a huge straw hat somewhere. And he chewed constantly on stalks of timothy.

They reached the patch of woods near Northport shortly after noon. They tied their horses loosely to saplings and walked farther into the woods, following a little stream.

After five minutes or so they came across a little fire, by which loafed two men. Two more came out of the woods after a moment or so.

"Too big a crowd," said Cole Baker. "Better keep a watch upstream, Bob." Cole was the oldest and biggest of the three Baker brothers, a very capable-looking man. He wore a broadcloth suit, the trousers tucked into high boots. He looked like a prosperous cattle buyer or small-town businessman.

Frank Carney was a broad-shouldered man of middle height. He was clean-shaven except for a sweeping mustache. He was a calm, thoughtful man. His brother, Jess, was five feet eleven, well built, with a short, sandy beard. His eyes were washed-out blue and slightly staring. They were cold eyes. Everything about Jess was tense. His step was like that of a tiger walking in a forest dense with hounds. Even as he stood beside the little fire in this peaceful forest you got the impression that if a twig snapped somewhere he would be whirling and reaching for the two guns at his hips.

He was the most desperate man in the country. Publicity had made him that. Although his brother was the leader, Jess was blamed for every crime, every holdup committed from Pittsburgh to El Paso, from Butte, Montana, to Raleigh, South Carolina. Law officers between those four points thought of Jess Carney every day of

their lives. If there was a suspicious-looking man in their town, they thought of Jess Carney and cold sweat came out on their bodies. They thought of the rewards and wondered if they were large enough.

Frank Carney outlined the plan. "There's a saloon right across from the bank. Jess and I'll be standing out in front of it at a quarter to three. At that time, Cole, you and Billy should be coming up from the south. And you, Jim," he nodded to John Miller's hired hand, whose name was really Jim Portland, "will just be coming out of the general store with Fletch, where you've made some little purchase. That leaves you, Jim, and Bob outside the bank with the horses."

"We leave together and we stick together. Up to this point, anyway. Here we'll split up into little groups. Everybody understand now?"

Fletch Higgins and Jim Portland rode into the town of Northport shortly after two o'clock. They tied their horses outside the bank building, making slip knots that could be untied with a jerk. They sized up the street, chatted for a moment in front of the bank, then walked across the street to a store over which was the sign: *Farmer's Saloon—Tables for Ladies.*

They had a glass of beer, talked for a few minutes in calm, sober tones. Then they left and went next door to the store of Abel Kinsey, General Merchandise.

Jim Portland spent five minutes buying a hickory work shirt. Then Fletch Higgins bought some chewing tobacco. By that time the big wall clock read 2:30, but Higgins brought out a railroad man's watch. "Two-forty-four," he said to Portland.

Portland nodded. They walked to the door and Portland tossed his newly bought work shirt to the counter. He unrolled his linen duster, brought out the two cartridge belts and guns, and strapped them about his hips. He put on the linen duster. Higgins meanwhile was performing a similar task.

Abel Kinsey watched them, wide-eyed. But he said nothing.

When they stepped out of the store, Jim and Bob Baker were standing by the horses across the street. Jess and Frank Carney were approaching the bank from the east. Bill Whately and Cole Baker were coming from the west.

The Carneys entered the bank first. Then Fletch Higgins and Jim Portland. Cole Baker and Bill Whately stopped at the door, one looking in each direction. Jim Baker was still by the horses. Bob Baker had taken a shotgun from one of the horses and was standing in the middle of the sidewalk.

In the bank things moved swiftly. Eight guns came into eight hands and began sweeping the bank. "This is a holdup," Frank Carney announced in his loud, precise voice.

Jess Carney punctuated the remark by snarling at a teller, "Up with them! Don't try any funny stuff."

There were two tellers behind wickets, a woman working over some books, and the cashier behind a railed enclosure. Four customers were also in the bank.

The woman promptly fainted, the tellers raised their hands, and the cashier looked as though his dead mother-in-law had suddenly come to life.

The customers were scared off. Frank Carney whipped a wheat sack from under his linen duster and vaulting the railing in front of the cashier,

entered the teller's compartments. He started scooping money into the sack, ignoring the silver. When he was halfway through Jess came back into the compartments.

He swore roundly. "Why damn it, there is no money here." He stormed out to the cashier. He thrust the muzzle of a Navy pistol against the man's left temple. "Come on—open up that damn vault!" he snapped.

The banker almost joined his female bookkeeper in the land of the unconscious. "I—I—can't!" he gulped.

"The hell you can't!" snarled Jess Carney. He laid his left-hand gun along the banker's head, a good solid blow. The banker's head hit his desk.

Jess stepped back and swore again. He kicked at the banker's legs and dislodged the body out of the chair so that it slumped to the floor. He kicked it again.

"Easy, Jess!" snapped Jim Portland. "That ain't going to help."

"The hell it ain't!" cried Jess. He ran into the first teller's compartment. "You—open the vault!"

The teller backed against his counter until he could go no more. "I—I don't know the combination," he said.

Jess Carney sent a bullet whizzing past the teller's ear. "The next won't miss you," he said ominously.

White-faced, the teller came out of his compartment. He went warily past Jess, then almost ran to the door of the big vault against the end of the room. He started fumbling with the combination.

Outside the bank a gun thundered.

A couple of Northport citizens across the street from the bank were the first to grasp what was going on. "They're holding up the bank!" one of them cried. Both dashed into Abel Kinsey's store.

Above the store, Henry Pitzer, home on vacation from medical school, was in his father's office. He heard the shout of the man downstairs and threw up the window. He saw Bob Baker with his shotgun in front of the bank, cried out, and went for the old-fashioned Navy pistol his father always kept in his desk. He got it and sprang back to the window. He took quick aim and fired at Bob Baker.

Bob Baker staggered and the shotgun fell from his hands. He bent to retrieve it and Henry Pitzer's second shot smashed through his jaw. Bob Baker went down to his knees.

Jim Baker cried out in anguish when he saw what had happened to his brother. He whirled to face the building across the street, saw the medical student in the window, and sent a snap shot at him. Henry Pitzer ducked back, unhurt.

The window of Abel Kinsey's store shattered under the blast of a shotgun fired by one of the two Northport citizens who had ducked into the store and seized a gun from a rack. The glass broken, he was now revealed, the gun at his shoulder aimed for another shot. Jim Baker fired two quick shots at him, saw the man fall back, and then ran to his brother's side.

Bob was on his knees, blood gushing from his mouth. He was sobbing and groping for the shotgun he had dropped when the first bullet from Henry Pitzer hit him.

With the two bandits together, Henry Pitzer again appeared at the window. He stabbed out with his father's gun and fired another shot, which went through Jim Baker's straw hat.

Cole Baker, in the doorway of the bank, ran down the short flight of

steps. He sized up the situation in a glance and sent a bullet at Henry Pitzer across the street. The medical student yelped and disappeared.

Now one of the men in Kinsey's store opened fire with a Winchester. The first bullet crashed through the bank window, the second sent splinters flying from the wooden sidewalk in front of the bank.

Bill Whately came down now and began shooting at a man in the doorway of the saloon next door to Kinsey's store. The man fell at the third shot. His fall was the signal for three men, armed with pistols, to leap out of the saloon and begin firing.

In the bank, things were not going well. When he heard the first bullet outside, Jess Carney became a wild man. "Damn you, hurry!" he screamed at the teller who was fumbling with the vault combination.

He fired a shot at the steel vault door and the bullet splattered on the steel and a fragment struck the face of the teller. He yelled and leaped back involuntarily. Carney shot him through the head.

The remaining teller in his booth, counting himself lost, made a desperate stab for a gun under his counter. Frank Carney clubbed him with the butt of a Navy pistol.

Jim Portland, keeping his guns on the four customers in the bank, thought, *So this is the end of it!*

Fletch Higgins had rushed to a window and was looking out. "We better call it off, Frank!" he yelled. "The whole town's out there shooting at the boys."

A bullet broke glass beside Higgins's face and behind him a customer of the bank cried out.

"Get down on the floor—all of you!" Jim Portland ordered.

The men fell almost as one. Portland backed away, still watching them. One or two of them might be armed and it would not be good if they retreated from the bank and left their rear unguarded.

"Come on, Jess!" Frank Carney called to his raging brother. "We're licked."

Outside, the battle between citizens and outlaws had taken on tremendous proportions. Men and boys had appeared from everywhere, were taking shelter in doorways, firing from windows. Every type of weapon was represented, derringer, shotgun, rifle, and six-shooter.

Jim Baker was trying to help Bob to a horse. Cole Baker was covering their retreat, firing methodically. Bill Whately was down. He lay in a huddle in the middle of the sidewalk. He would not ride away.

Fletch Higgins sprang out of the bank door, the gun in his right hand blazing. He was swearing. Frank Carney came out, carrying the wheat sack in one hand, a gun in the other.

Across the street, blood on his face, Henry Pitzer again appeared in the window of his father's office. He had a rifle in his hands now. It went to his shoulder, blasted, and Fletch Higgins threw up his hands and pitched to the wooden sidewalk. A pained look twisted Frank Carney's face. He stooped and peered into Higgins's face. Then he choked and turned to Cole Baker.

"Fletch's done!"

Jim Baker shoved his brother into the saddle. Instantly a bullet knocked him off. Jim cried out, "Cole!"

Jess Carney came out of the bank like an avenger. His first bullet dropped a man in the doorway of the sa-

loon. His second sent another citizen screaming into the saloon.

And last came Jim Portland. He went sick when he saw the carnage on the street. Once before in his life he had felt that way; at Lawrence, Kansas, when he and these other men had fought under the black flag of Quantrill.

"Let's go, boys!" cried out the voice of Frank Carney.

Jim Portland and Frank and Jess Carney covered the others while they mounted their horses. Bob Baker, lifted into the saddle again by both his brothers, fell across the animal's neck. Jim Baker rode up beside him, reached out a hand to his brother, and then his own animal screamed and reared up.

Jim Baker hit the dusty street of Northport. He scrambled to his feet and with impotent fury hurled one of his Colts at a man more than a hundred feet away. Then he ran, and with incredible adroitness, sprang up on Bob Baker's horse.

When Jess Carney went for his horse, the plunging animal tore the reins out of his hand. It sprang onto the sidewalk and then another bullet hit it. It went down with a loud thump.

"Here, Jess!" cried Jim Portland, one foot already in the stirrup of his own animal.

But Frank Carney was mounted now. He forced his horse over to his brother and Jess sprang up behind Frank.

And then they were off. Shotguns roared, rifles thundered, and six-guns cracked. Horses' hoofs pounded the dust. A man sprang out into the road ahead of the thundering cavalcade, kneeled in the dust, and sent a bullet at Frank Carney. The leader of the outlaw band winced. Then he killed the man in the road with a bullet through his forehead.

There was no pursuit—not immediately. The outlaw band was too formidable in a group, sufficient horses could not be rounded up quickly enough in Northport. There was no recognized leader, although individually the citizens had fought well.

When the bandits were out of Northport, the sheriff, attracted by the crescendo of firing, galloped in from his home a mile on the far side of Northport. He learned quickly what had happened and just as quickly brought order in Northport. A posse was formed and two miles behind the bandits rode more than 30 Northport citizens. And behind them, the telegraph operator in Northport was flashing the message to neighboring towns. In an hour every road would be guarded.

In the meanwhile the six survivors of the Carney-Baker gang, mounted on four horses, were traveling as they had not traveled since Federal troops had chased them 12 and 13 years before.

They had two miles' start and only one mile more to go before they would reach the forest where they had assembled at noon. The horses that were carrying double were already heaving. The others, too, were winded.

Bob Baker was almost unconscious. He was moaning incoherently and held in the saddle by his brother, Jim. Cole, beside Jim, had a look of misery on his face. Directly behind the Bakers rode Jess and Frank Carney.

Jim Portland brought up the rear. His horse was not extended to the fullest. They were a quarter mile from the woods when the Carneys' horse gave out. Frank Carney climbed up behind big Cole Baker and Jess mounted be-

hind Jim Portland.

"Let him out!" Jess Carney cried when he was up behind Jim Portland. "He's got more!" He raked the animal's flank with his spurs and Jim Portland turned furiously.

"Stop it, you fool!" he said viciously.

Jess snarled back at Portland, "What're you trying to save him for—yourself?"

Jim Portland fought down a retort. In a minute or two they reached the woods and were all compelled to dismount and lead the horses. Jess Carney plunged ahead of the others then. "Come on, we'll lose them here."

His brother started to follow, and then turned. Bob Baker was too far gone to be taken off the horse. His brothers were on either side of the horse, guiding it and helping to hold Bob in the saddle. With the low-hanging branches their pace would be slow.

Jim Portland turned toward the road and watched bleakly. Already he could see the posse in the distance. They couldn't help but see their trail in here. The forest did not cover more than 20 acres. There were that many men in the posse.

It was the end of a long trail. In 1862, Jim Portland, a tall, skinny boy of 16, had joined Quantrill's guerrillas. Three years of the fiercest fighting, the hardest riding, the most awful butchery—and Jim Portland, at 19, was world-weary. Amnesty had been granted. Men had not observed it. Persecuted and hunted, he had taken to the hills and the trails.

Jess Carney, ambushed and left for dead, embittered, fought against a society that could not forgive the atrocities of border warfare. His brother, Frank, gave him a clear brain and a cool head. And in time the Bakers and other former companions-in-arms had flocked to the outlaw band.

And now Northport was behind them. Ahead of them was a pitifully small shelter. With them was a dying man, whom blood ties would not permit leaving behind.

"We'll have to make a stand here," said cool Frank Carney.

Jess Carney came back, his face black with anger. "We can get away, Cole," he said. "You've got to leave Bob. It can't be helped."

"Why, you yellow—" began Jim Baker.

Big Cole Baker laid a hand on his younger brother's arm. "No, Jess," he said, "Jim and I are going to stick with Bob. You can go if you like."

"You're a fool," cried Jess Carney. "Why should all of us risk our lives because—"

Frank Carney's eyes blazed. "Shut up, Jess!" he roared, for once losing his temper. "We're sticking!"

Jess looked at his brother. Then he took a deep breath. "All right," he said. And the decision made, he ran back to stand beside Jim Portland.

"Here they come," said Portland. He had taken the interval to load both guns, six shells in each, instead of the usual five.

The posse had seen the hoofprints leaving the road. They guessed that the outlaws were not far away and they were discussing it. Jim Portland could hear the rumble of many excited voices, but could not make out the words.

"They'll leave their horses with one or two men," said Jess Carney. He was cool now, clear-headed. He cocked both guns, held them loosely in his hands.

Jim Portland could hear twigs snap-

ping, but as yet saw no one. Frank Carney appeared between his brother and Portland. "We'll hold them off a while. The Bakers will get a good start. Bob's in a bad way."

Jess Carney made no protest. He didn't know how many men were in the posse, didn't care now. He was nerved to fight, and fight he would, as long as the fight was possible. Or until his brother gave the sign to retreat.

Bushes crashed ahead, twigs snapped, and then suddenly men showed. They were 50 yards or more away. A faint, twisted smile appeared on Frank Carney's lips. On his left, Jess stood, tensed. Carney glanced at Jim Portland, saw the bleak look in his face and sighed lightly. He had always known that Portland's heart was not in it. But he had fought side by side with Portland at Centralia and he was content with Portland on his right.

They came now in a headlong charge. At a distance of less than 100 feet one of the possemen saw the three outlaws and let out a frightened yell. Immediately several guns were discharged.

"All right," said Frank Carney.

His own gun crashed simultaneously with those of Jess and Jim Portland. It was merciless fire at close range. The posse broke and retreated.

"We'll back up, too!" Frank Carney exclaimed.

The Bakers were already out of sight. They had taken two horses with them. The other two had bolted with the volley of the posse. There was no time to round them up. On foot the three outlaws retreated several hundred feet. Then they heard the posse charging and, taking cover behind convenient trees, again waited.

The posse came more warily this time. The men were spread out and leaping from tree to tree. They knew now what they were facing and they were going at it adequately. Jess Carney fired first and brought a scream of pain from a posseman. Jim Portland saw a man's shoulder sticking out from a too-narrow tree, took deliberate aim, and fired. The man fell thrashing to the ground.

Frank Carney fired two or three times. The marksmanship of the outlaws was too good for Indian warfare. The posse, without a signal, charged again. Four men went down under the withering fire that met them before the posse took to cover.

It was time to retreat again. Frank Carney took a bullet in his left biceps and lost one of his guns. A rifle bullet grazed Portland's thigh, but did not incapacitate him.

Two hours after midnight John Miller's shepherd dog began barking and rushed down to the pigsties. There a shadow materialized and a voice spoke to the dog. The shepherd stopped barking. It bounced up to Jim Portland and he patted the dog and spoke to it in a low voice.

After a moment he gripped the dog by the collar and, stooping, walked with it toward the huge, shadowy barn. He opened a door and went inside. The horses moved nervously in the darkness. Portland said a soothing word and groped toward the door of his little room. Inside he struck a match, and by its feeble light lit a lantern. He unstrapped the two cartridge belts and began rolling them up. Then, thinking better of it, he spread them out under the pillow on his bunk.

The shepherd dog had remained out in the horse stables. Portland whistled it into his room, and left, leaving the

dog inside. He went outside, walked back to the pigsties. He emitted a low whistle and Frank Carney's voice spoke softly out of the shadows. "All right?"

"Yes. I've got the dog locked up. Better touch me and have Jess touch you, Frank. We don't want to make any noise. John Miller's a light sleeper."

In chain fashion the three men reached the barn. They passed through the horse stables into the center section where the hay was stacked almost to the rafters.

"It's going to be tough up there in the hay, you know," Jim Portland said quietly.

"It's going to be a helluva lot tougher outside," said Frank Carney philosophically. "There must be five hundred men out."

"I never was in Northport before today," said Portland. "If none of the Northport men who saw me happen to come here, we'll get by. They just think I went to New Ulm today to get drunk. I—I didn't quit the job here."

"Suppose one of them comes up in the hay?" growled Jess Carney.

"That's your risk," said Portland. "The old man won't be likely to and I'll try to see that I feed the stock. The son's not so keen on me, anyway—he won't hurry to beat me to any of the work. But Frank—Jess—"

"Yeah, Jim?" said Frank Carney.

Jim Portland cleared his throat in the darkness. "I rather like these folks. The old man and the girl have treated me white. I wouldn't like for them to get hurt."

"Oh, so there's a girl?" snorted Jess.

"Quiet, Jess," said Frank Carney. He reached out and patted Jim Portland's arm. "They won't be hurt, Jim. I give you my word."

"All right. I'll see that you get food every evening. I won't dare take the chance during the day."

"We'll get by," said Frank Carney.

They climbed into the hay then. Jim Portland waited several minutes until the hay stopped rustling, then he walked heavily to his own little room. He kept the dog there for the rest of the night.

He overslept a little in the morning. The sun was already beginning to peek over the horizon when he woke suddenly and heard someone moving around in the barn. He had gone to sleep fully dressed. He sprang up now, rubbed his eyes, and blinked.

Then his shoulders slumped. It hadn't been a horrible dream. It had all happened yesterday. Fletch Higgins and Bill Whately dead; Bob, Jim, and Cole Baker out there somewhere. And in the hayloft—

A German voice, thick with accent, called from the barn, "Hey, Harry!"

"Coming, Mr. Miller!" Jim Portland called back.

He opened the door and stepped into the horse stables. Old John Miller looked at him over a horse's rump and grinned.

"What's the matter—drink too much beer yesterday?"

Jim Portland shook his head. "I did have a few. Guess I overslept."

"What time you get in?"

"Oh—'bout one, maybe a little later."

"*Ja?* Well, I'm glad you're here. I thought maybe you got mit them bandit chasers. Oscar Schimmel stop by last night. He say they get togedder big—what you call—posse—to go after them robbers what hold up the bank in Northport."

"No posse for me," said Jim Portland. "I heard about it, in New Ulm.

They think it was Jess Carney's gang."

"*Ja*, that's what Oscar say. I t'ink he crazy. Every time I read the *Deutscher Blatt*, they got somet'ing about this Jess Carney. One week he hold up bank in California, next week train in Pittsburgh. What is he—a flying man maybe?"

"You don't think it was the Carneys, then?"

"Na, just some tough guys from around here. If it was them Carneys they wouldn't let them dumbbells in Northport shoot them up like that."

Portland nodded in agreement. "I guess you're right, Mr. Miller. Well, I'll do the milking now."

He got a stool from a nail on the wall, took down a milk pail, and left John Miller with the horses. He milked two cows in an adjoining section of the barn.

He carried the milk to the house and left it on the back porch. When he was leaving, August Miller came out of the house, his face stupid with sleep.

"Uh, Harry!" he said dully.

"Hello, August," said Portland. "The cows are milked. Your father's taking care of the horses."

August cleared his throat and spat phlegm. "That leaves the hogs for me. Damn—always I get the dirty work."

"You don't like to milk the cows," said Jim Portland. He looked toward the house. A whiff of something cooking assailed his nostrils. He went back to the barn.

Ten minutes later Mary Miller's voice called from the house: "Breakfast!"

Portland got a bucket of water, went to his little room, and washed. Then he walked slowly to the house. He entered the kitchen by the back door.

Mary Miller, lifting a coffeepot from the stove, looked at him. Her eyes were wide and her fair complexion seemed lighter than ever. Her mouth was slightly open.

"Good morning, Mary," he said.

She continued to stare at him. Then set set the coffeepot down on the stove. "G-good morning, Harry," she said.

Mrs. Miller came out of a front room, smiled at Portland, and bustled about the stove. She was a stout, motherly-looking woman of 48 or 50. The two Millers were already seated at the table in the kitchen, where they always ate meals on weekdays. August Miller was wolfing a stack of pancakes.

Jim Portland pulled out a chair across from John Miller. Mary brought the coffee and poured out a cupful for him. He helped himself to pancakes from the platter, poured syrup on them. He ate, and all the while was conscious that Mary Miller's eyes were on him.

Why? She couldn't possibly suspect—

John Miller finished his coffee, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and pushed his chair back from the table. He brought out a corncob pipe and began filling it. As he worked at it, he looked around the kitchen.

"I t'ink Harry got a big head today," he offered.

August, with his mouth full of pancakes, mumbled, "I think he's got a girl in New Ulm."

John Miller brightened—that would be something to josh the hired man about! "A girl, maybe? A nice, plump German girl with yellow hair? Is that what she looks like, Harry?"

Jim Portland was thinking of the Bakers. Perhaps they had been killed by now; perhaps they were just making their last stand. The shambles he had seen the day before was making

every moment a horror for him. He saw Bob Baker with his shattered jaw, saw Fletch Higgins pitching to the sidewalk. And John Miller wanted to joke with him about a non-existent girl in New Ulm.

Well, he had to get on with his work. Because Jess and Frank Carney were out there in the hayloft.

"There's no girl in New Ulm," he said.

August Miller grinned wickedly. "Maybe closer, huh? Hey!" He twisted around and leered at his sister. "Hey, Mary—maybe the hired man's sparkin' you, huh?"

Jim Portland fought down the impulse to pick up his cup of coffee and throw it in August Miller's face. He knew that if he said something to August his anger would carry him away. So he continued eating.

The stocky August was not content. He knew that he had scored. "Whaddya blushing about, Mary?" he pursued.

Jim Portland got up from the table. Without looking in Mary's direction, he left the kitchen. He went to the stables and harnessed the team of bays. When he brought them out of the barn to hitch to the plow, Mary was in the yard, emptying dishwater. She saw him and came part way over.

"That big mouth of August's is always going," she said.

"A hired man should be able to stand anything," Jim Portland said.

"But you don't have to!" she exclaimed. "You've got more brains in your little finger than August has in that big head of his."

"He's your brother."

He finished the hitching and walked around the team. She came closer.

"I—I was surprised to see you this morning."

He tensed. "Why? You know I was just taking off a day."

There was a moment of silence. Then she said, "Yes—that's right."

He shot a quick glance at her face. Her ordinarily smooth forehead was creased. She wasn't satisfied. She wanted to say more, but he was making it difficult for her—which was what he wanted.

"Well, I guess I'll get started," he said. He clucked to the team and moved off. When he rounded the barn he looked back. She was standing where he had left her.

It's going to be harder than I figured, he thought.

He was in the field by seven o'clock. And before eight John Miller hailed him from the barnyard. Portland loosened the bridle of the bays so they could graze at the edge of the field and walked toward the house.

He saw saddled horses in the farmyard when he was some distance away and he looked longingly toward the barn, where his guns were. There were five men in the group. All had guns strapped around their waists and two or three carried rifles in addition.

"Hello, Harry," one of the men called to him when he was still 40 feet away. "We're getting up a posse, thought maybe you'd want to go along."

"It's all right by me, Harry," interposed John Miller. "We got to do this some time. Those bandits, they are bad."

"You figure they're around here, Mr. Schultz?" Portland asked the leader of the group.

Schultz shrugged. "Emil Tegtmeyer, he says the posse followed some tracks

to the big woods the other side of Birch Creek. That's on'y six-seven miles from here. We like to get them. You look like you can handle yourself."

"Well, I don't know," Portland said. "I haven't got a gun."

"I can lend you one of mine," said Schultz. "Can you shoot? I bet you can."

"Well, I have done a little shooting," Portland admitted. "I'm better with a shotgun, though. Prairie chickens—"

"Yeah, I bet—well, how about it?"

Portland looked back toward the field, his eyes taking in the barn at the same time. "Do you need me?" he asked. "There's a lot of work and—"

Schultz looked strangely at Portland. The latter knew that he was thinking how deceiving looks were. A big strapping fellow like this, timid about guns—and bandits.

"No," Schultz said, "we don't exactly need you. There's forty-five men already over there, but I thought maybe you'd like to come along."

"I think I ought to get this work done today," Portland said. "Maybe August—"

"Phooey," spat John Miller. "August is too lazy to ride a horse all day and night."

The possemen rode off. The members began talking before they were out of earshot of Portland. Their comments were not flattering to his courage.

"I didn't want to call you in the first place," said John Miller. "But I didn't want them to think I was too stingy to let you take a day off."

"Well, I had a day off yesterday."

"Sure, so you work today, huh?"

Jim Portland went back to the field. He worked steadily until noon, then came in for lunch, which was a huge meal. After he finished eating he wandered out to the barn. He walked through the hayloft, but did not hear a sound.

He went to his room, started to sit down on his bunk, then tensed. The pillow, he was sure, had been disarranged. He watched such things.

He picked up the pillow. The guns were still there, but surely the cartridge belts had been moved— Who had been here? John Miller—August—?

He had thrown the linen duster away the day before. He secured a wheat sack and wrapped the guns in it. Then he loosened a plank in the floor and thrust the little bundle in the cavity underneath.

Although no one should really come in here— Yet someone had. He sat down on the cot and pondered the matter. Should he tell the Carneys?

When he went outside again he saw John Miller. The old German's face was impassive. Portland didn't think he was the one. August was the likely one, of course, and if it was August something would come of it—of that Portland was sure.

Mary? She had no reason to go to the hired man's sleeping-quarters. A German farmer's daughter didn't do such a thing. Not unless she wanted to get talked about.

About two o'clock he saw August Miller and Mary drive off in the buggy. They returned around five. Portland worked in the field until a quarter to six, then brought the horses in, curried them, and gave them feed.

By that time supper was ready, a substantial meal, but not as heavy as the noonday one. August had evidently had a few beers in New Ulm. He was in a surly mood.

"Somebody told me you was afraid

of a gun, Harry," he began.

"August!" said Mrs. Miller. "What did I tell you about picking on Harry?"

"I'm not picking on him," growled August. "Only someone in New Ulm said Harry was afraid to go out after them outlaws."

"I didn't see you going, August," cut in Mary Miller.

"Well, did it do them any good to go out?" exclaimed John Miller. "They didn't catch them, did they?"

"No, but they got them surrounded," said August. "Half of New Ulm's gone over. It's Jess Carney's gang, all right."

"Did they see them?" asked John Miller.

"Oh, sure, they even fired some shots at them. There's four-five of them. They got into the woods and the boys got them surrounded. They probably got them by now."

Jim Portland cut meat. He put it in his mouth, but he couldn't taste it. Perhaps they did have the Bakers surrounded. They could be over there in the woods. It was in the general direction the Bakers had fled. There weren't four or five of them, of course, but the larger number could be normal exaggeration. And if the posse had fired at them and if they hadn't immediately identified themselves—well, they weren't friendly men.

Before the meal was over a horse's hoofs clattered in the farmyard and a strong German voice called out to John Miller.

"Come on in," Miller called back.

A strapping farmhand came up into the kitchen.

"Hello, Louie," said John Miller. "What's up?"

"I was just going home from New Ulm," the farmer said. "Thought you might want to know about the big fight over by Birch Creek."

"August was just telling us about it—"

"No, this is another fight. I only heard it in Ulm when I was going home. They tried to capture them bank robbers and they had a big fight. John Stransky got killed and Otto Tegtmeyer got a bullet in the leg."

"They get the outlaws?" Jim Portland could keep the question back no longer.

Louie shook his head. "Not yet. But they'll get them. Shucks, there's five hundred men there now and all of 'em got guns. The robbers can't get away."

Portland went out of the house. It was almost an hour to darkness and he couldn't risk going to the Carneys until then. He couldn't risk anything. The Bakers were surrounded, only a few miles away. They would fight to the end—and Jim Portland and Jess and Frank Carney wouldn't be with them.

They couldn't be. There were 500 possemen. It would be as hard to get into the woods as it was for the Bakers to get out. There was nothing to be done—except wait. And waiting was hard.

Louie went home. John and August Miller came out on the porch to smoke their pipes while the women were washing the supper dishes. John Miller called to Portland. "Come on over and smoke a pipe."

"After a while," Portland stalled. He went into the horse stables, looked around.

And at last darkness fell grudgingly. Portland slipped out of the barn and circled toward the house. Behind the kitchen was a screened porch. He went in without a sound and by sense of

touch found meat left over from supper.

He could wait no longer. He got safely back to the barn, went to the haymow, climbed into the hay.

"Frank–Jess!" he whispered.

"Jim," came the soft reply.

"Quiet," Portland cautioned. He moved toward where they were buried under hay by the eaves. "Here's food. But I can't stay here just now," he said hurriedly. "I've got to tell you, though. The Bakers are surrounded about seven miles from here–"

"We've got to help them," said Jess Carney quickly. It was typical of him that he had entirely forgotten the incident of the day before when he'd wanted to leave Bob Baker behind.

"They're surrounded by five hundred men," said Portland. "Everybody with a gun in miles around is there. They–they even asked me to join the posse this morning."

Frank Carney inhaled sharply. "We can't do a thing?"

"Nothing. We couldn't get through to them. I'm afraid it's the finish."

"God," said Frank Carney.

Jess Carney began swearing. His brother silenced him. "Easy, Jess. Jim –how do we stand here?"

Jim Portland thought of his guns that had been touched that morning. He ought to tell them. But it would only alarm them, Jess in particular. He would want to go immediately. And the countryside was too aroused.

"We're all right, if we lay low for a few days until things quiet down. I'm not suspected at all. The only thing I'm worried about is food. I may have trouble getting enough–"

"We can get by on short rations," said Frank. "Only we'd like some water. This hay is dusty. Makes you want to sneeze all the time."

"All right," said Portland. "I'll try my best. But remember–don't you stir when you hear someone around here. Not until you hear me speak first. One of the Millers might come in."

He left them. He went to his own little room, struck a match, and lighted his lantern. Then he almost dropped it to the floor.

"Mary," he said, "what are you doing here?"

"I wanted to talk to you. I heard you get the food from the porch. You took it to someone in the haymow?"

Dumb, he stared at her.

Then a sob caught in her throat. "What–is your real name?"

That was the one thing he had not wanted her to know. Ever. He would rather have stayed there in Northport with Fletch Higgins and Bill Whately. But he was here and Mary had asked him a question that he could not avoid answering. She already knew the answer–perhaps not the exact answer, but one that approximated it.

"Jim Portland," he said.

She had been tensed for the answer, but when it came she recoiled as if an invisible hand had slapped her. "It's true, then!" she cried softly. "You were at Northport yesterday."

"Yes."

She moved away, made almost a complete circuit of the little room, then came back to him. "You've got to leave here. At once. It's not safe. There'll be people who saw you."

"I can't leave," he said. "Not yet."

"Because of your friends in the hay –the Bakers and Carneys."

"I'm afraid it's really the Bakers over there by Birch River. They–they're gone. But Frank and Jess–"

"They're the ones who are here?"

"Frank's wounded in the leg. He can't travel. Not without a horse."

"Their lives are forfeit," said Mary Miller. "Over and over. It isn't right that they should escape."

"They are my friends. We were together in the war. They saved my life, more than once. I saved each of theirs. Can you understand that, Mary?"

She nodded her head slowly. "I think so. They're your comrades. You'd sacrifice your own life for them."

"You don't understand them or me, Mary," Portland said miserably. "You were here during the war—but the war didn't touch you as it did us in Missouri. We were fighting it down there as far back as 'fifty-five. The hatreds and feuds of those years haven't been healed. The government granted us amnesty—the people didn't. Well—we became outlaws. There's fifty thousand dollars offered for Jess Carney, *dead or alive!*"

"And how much for you?"

He winced. "Five thousand—for any member of the gang."

"And there are a thousand men out who are eager to collect the money. They'll be here, tomorrow—the day after. And you must leave. Right now while they've got the Bakers surrounded is your best chance. Tomorrow it may be too late. You haven't—"

She stopped. Out in the barnyard the hard earth rang to the clanging of shod horses, many horses.

Mary shot a startled look at Jim Portland. Without a word she ran out of the little room. Jim Portland looked at the loose board in the floor under which were his guns. His lips were a thin line and his face was bleak. But he left the guns where they were. He went out to the stables. At a window he listened to the talk outside.

"Bakers—riddled with bullets—alive—Cole Baker, nineteen bullets in him."

So the war was over for the Baker brothers. Jim Portland turned away. He went to his room.

In the morning, August Miller came into the stable. "Well, they got them damned bank robbers. Filled them full of holes. You shoulda gone with them, Harry, when they asked you. You mighta got a share of the reward money."

Reward money for the Bakers. August Miller had the faculty of poking red-hot needles into Jim Portland. But Portland fought for control. He rubbed on a horse's flank.

"Are they all alive—the Bakers?"

"Yeah, but they're full of holes. They don't figure any of em'll last. If they do—it's the pen for life, for them. All they got to do now is get the other three that got away—the Carneys and Jim Portland. They won't get far. There's two thousand men out for them now. Maybe I'll go myself."

"For the reward money?"

August Miller scowled. "Yeah, the reward. What's the matter with that? Fifty thousand, they say, for this Jess Carney. He's on'y a man. I'd like to meet him some time."

"With guns?"

"Yeah, with guns. I ain't afraid of guns. I c'n shoot. Or I'll fight him with bare hands."

Jim Portland put away the combs and brushes. He had to get outside before he smashed the big German in the face. He went out into the barnyard.

Two men were riding into the barnyard. Portland stiffened when he saw the nickel on the vest of one of the riders. He turned to go back into the barn.

The voice of the deputy sheriff hailed him. "Hey, Harry Cummings—wait a minute."

Portland turned and walked toward the house. "Yeah, what is it?"

"Just want to ask you a question or two. I'm Deputy Sheriff Weiss of New Ulm."

"I know," said Portland. "I've seen you."

"Yeah, I saw you in New Ulm yesterday, too. You met a man there and you rode off with him."

John Miller came out of the house. "Hello, Tony," he said. "Hello, Philip."

"Hello, John," replied Tony Weiss, the deputy. "I was just telling your hired man here I got a picture this morning of them fellows they killed over in Northport yesterday. Damn if one of them don't look a lot like the fellow that was hangin' around Ulm." Fletch Higgins. And this rural German deputy had a memory for faces. Of course the picture of a dead man didn't always look like that of a live one, but—

"You mean Steve Brill, Sheriff?" he asked. "He works on a farm over near Barclay. We come from the same town in Nebraska."

"That so?" The deputy frowned. "Well, I dunno. I'd have sworn this was him." He produced a photograph from his shirt pocket and handed it down to Portland.

It was ghastly. They had propped Fletch Higgins and Bill Whately up against a store front and taken their pictures. The blood had not even been washed off Bill Whately's face. And Fletch Higgins—his eyes were wide open and dead and staring.

"He does look a little like Steve," Portland said in a voice he tried to make matter-of-fact.

"Haw haw!" guffawed John Miller. "What's the matter with you, Tony? You t'ink maybe Harry's one of them? He ain't even got a gun and anyway, how could he rob a bank in Northport when he was plowing my potatoes?"

"Harry was in New Ulm day before yesterday," Weiss retorted.

"That's right, I was," said Portland steadily. "I had a few beers with Steve and then we got a bottle and went down to Englebrecht's pond and went swimming."

The deputy was almost convinced. "What's the name of that farmer over in Barclay this friend of yours works for?"

"Uh, Spring, I think—no, Springer. If you go over there you'll find my friend, Steve. Ask him about Meadowlands, Nebraska."

"Maybe I will. Well, so long, John. Hi, August—"

Jim Portland turned. August Miller was sitting on an overturned wooden washtub halfway between the house and the barn. He had undoubtedly heard every bit of what had been said.

John Miller was chuckling. "It's a good thing you ain't got no guns, Harry, otherwise that dumb Weiss woulda been sure you was a bank robber. See, that's what comes when you go to town in the middle of the week. If you stayed here and worked—"

"I think I'll get at the potatoes," Portland said.

"Naw," protested August Miller. "I'm sick of that damn corn. Let him work on that today, Pop."

The cornfield was farther from the house and barns. But it would have been out of character for Portland to have protested to John Miller. He had always done whatever chore had been requested of him.

"All right, I'll cultivate the corn," he agreed.

He got the horses and the cultivator and went down to the field along the road. It was a quarter mile from the house. He worked there until noon.

He took care of the horses and went to his room to wash up. He tested the loose board in the floor. To his sensitive ear it sounded hollower than it should. He stooped and lifted the board. His guns were gone.

He put the board back, finished his washing. Then he went to the hayloft and climbed up.

"Frank!" he called. "Something may happen. If you hear a shot outside, you'll have to look after yourself."

"What's up?" whispered the voice of Frank Carney.

"I don't know—yet. I just wanted to warn you. I've got to go now."

He walked toward the house. John and August Miller were on the porch, smoking their pipes. The women were in the kitchen, finishing dinner.

August Miller scrutinized Portland with his piggish eyes. "Been takin' a nap in the hay, Harry?" he asked.

Portland saw the wisp of hay in the cuff of his trousers. "The horses eat hay, August," he said.

August Miller got up from his chair. He yawned and stepped to the kitchen door, reached inside, then whirled and stabbed a double-barreled shotgun at Jim Portland.

"Put up your hands—put 'em up!" he cried.

Jim Portland stood on the ground just below the porch step. He stared at August Miller, but made no move to raise his hands.

"Up, I tell you!" snarled August, "or I'll let you have this—both barrels!"

"August!" shouted John Miller. "What's come over you—the heat? That gun's loaded."

"Sure it is," retorted Miller. "And Jess Carney's going to get it."

"Jess Carney! Are you crazy?"

The women inside had heard, of course. Mary came dashing out. She caught hold of her brother's arm. "August, put down that gun!" she exclaimed.

Holding the gun with one hand, August Miller gave his sister a shove that threw her several feet away. Then he leaped sideward along the porch so no one could come up behind him.

"Where're your guns, Jess Carney?" he sneered.

"My name isn't Carney," said Portland. "And I have no guns. I don't know what this is all about—"

"Naw? You talked that lunkhead, Weiss, out of it. But not me. On account of I found them guns of your'n under the floor in your room. And I heard some of what you and Mary talked about. Enough."

So he knew, this ignorant piggish-eyed German farmer. And the game was played out. Or was it?

Jess and Frank Carney were still out in the barn. If Jim Portland was taken here a hundred men would flock to the farm; every inch and corner of it would be searched. That meant the Carneys would be taken, too. It was perhaps only fair that they should be—but Jim Portland didn't play the game that way. He had told Frank Carney to listen for a shot. There had to be one.

Well, August Miller would shoot.

"You win, August," said Jim Portland. "What are you going to do about it?" Deliberately, he started walking forward.

August Miller backed up against the

wall. "Keep back!" he croaked. "Keep back."

It took Portland a second to understand the amazing cowardice of the man. Even with a shotgun on him and knowing Portland was unarmed, he was afraid of him.

Despite that fear, he would shoot. A cornered rat will snap at a terrier. Portland kept on walking.

Mary Miller screamed. "Jim—he'll shoot. Please, don't."

"I can't help it," said Jim Portland. "I've got to."

"I'll shoot," whimpered August.

"Put down that gun, August," said John Miller in a frightened voice. "You can't shoot Harry. He's—all right. Don't do it." He took a step uncertainly toward his son.

August swiveled the gun in his father's direction. "Keep away, Pop. I've got this outlaw and I'm goin' to get a reward for him. Weiss and some of the men from Ulm'll be here in five minutes."

Even then it would be touch and go for the Carneys. They could handle August Miller and there were horses in the barn, but if the coming posse was a big one—

Mary Miller sobbed and ran past her father into the kitchen. Jim Portland started walking again.

"I'm coming, August," he said in a dead voice.

A gun inside the house exploded. Glass tinkled and August Miller screamed. The muzzle of the shotgun went up, his finger squeezed the trigger, and the blast went into the roof of the porch. Then August Miller fell.

Mary Miller came out of the door, one of Jim Portland's holsters in her left hand, the gun in her right. She did not even look at her brother. Her eyes were on Jim Portland's face. "I—I had to shoot him," she said.

"Och, Gott!" cried John Miller. "You shot your brother!"

"I had to, Father," Mary said dully. "I—love Jim."

Jim Portland said, "It's no use, Mary. I'm Jim Portland."

She stood as stiff as a post. "I know. But still—"

"You know how I felt toward you, Mary. You know, too, why I couldn't tell you. And you know that I've got to."

Behind him, at the barns, there was noise. Horses scampered out. Frank Carney's voice cried, "Coming, Jim!"

Portland whirled and ran toward the barn.

Both of Jess Carney's guns were in his hands. "I'll get them—"

"No," cried Portland. "It's finished here."

The horses were unsaddled, merely equipped with bridles. But that was good enough. They mounted.

"We'll have to cut for the woods," Portland cried. "There's a posse due here in a few minutes."

"Right!" cried Frank Carney.

They were off. Jim Portland swerved his horse toward the house. His eyes bridged the distance between himself and Mary's white face.

"I'll never forget, Mary!" he cried. "Good-by!"

Mary Miller made no response. She had shot her brother to save him. And now he was riding off—Jim Portland: guerrilla, killer, outlaw.

Then they were gone—Jess Carney, Frank Carney, and Jim Portland. Somewhere, sometime, they would meet their destiny. Perhaps today, perhaps not until tomorrow—but inevitably.

Free-for-All

LIN SLONE, hero of the Zane Grey story, "Wildfire," is a "mustanger," or wild-horse hunter. A small number of such men found a limited and hazardous source of income in the numerous herds of mustangs which roamed portions of the West during the 19th century. These animals were regarded by most ranchers as a nuisance, for they tore up the range, they spoiled water holes, they lured ranch horses away, they knocked down fences. The coming of the barbed-wire fence signaled the beginning of the end for the mustang; trying to go through it on the run, they slashed and tore themselves on the barbs, and resulting screw-worm infection killed off a great many. The wrathful owners of ruined fences put bullets into others. Most of the mustangs were scrubby specimens, of little value as mounts; the few really good ones were soon spotted and captured by the mustangers, which led to an ever greater proportion of inbred, inferior animals in the herds. Professional mustangers kept operating as long as there were horses to be had for the taking, but by about 1880 the depleted herds had been thoroughly picked over and such men as Wildfire's captor, Lin Slone, disappeared from the Western scene.

● Norman A. Fox, whose fine story, "The Man Who Rode Back," appears in this issue in the Zane Grey Western Award spot, is a Michigan-born resident of Montana whose boyhood summers, spent on an uncle's ranch, taught him the ways of the cowboy. His fiction output, since he became a professional writer in 1938, has been impressive; *The Feathered Sombrero* (1948) was his 14th book—outstanding among the other titles are *Silent in the Saddle*, *Cactus Cavalier*, *The Rider from Yonder*, and *Valley of Vanishing Riders*—and better than 250 stories of his have been published in the Western action magazines, and in *Collier's*, *Blue Book*, *Liberty*, *Argosy*, and the *Star Weekly* of Toronto. The taut drama of "The Man Who Rode Back" is kept always under effective control, and a powerful theme of personal conflict combines with restraint in its telling to produce a truly memorable story.

● "Scars," by Theodore Sturgeon, digs deep into the mind and emotions of a cowpoke. Almost certainly, Kellet never told the facts of his moving

experience but that once, by the dying campfire; and fortunately for us, author Sturgeon, concealed in a nearby sagebrush, was eavesdropping. He submitted the result under a different title, but agrees that "Scars" fits it perfectly.

● Justin Other Smith scores another belly-laugh bull's-eye in "False Teeth Never Ring True." Seems like these sharpers would tumble to the fact that they can't run any sandies on the Paintin' Pistoleer, but they *will* keep trying!

● Frank Gruber's reprint novelette, "Escape," is a fast-moving example of the fiction story based on fact (know what we mean?) and typical of this writer's terse and unadorned narrative style. Mr. Gruber, in former years a leader in the Western-fiction field, is now known mainly as a mystery writer, though he has published two Western books in recent months: *Fighting Man* and *Broken Lance.*

● "The Vow" marks Edwin L. Sabin's 12th appearance in ZGWM, only one of which was a reprint. Whether fact or fiction, they have maintained a consistently high quality, and "The Vow" is certainly among the best of the lot.

Coming in next months' ZGWM: a magazine abridgment of Zane Grey's novel, "The Man of the Forest," in which a solitude-loving woodland giant comes to the rescue of two lovely and distressed young ladies from the East—one of the most popular of all Zane Grey's books and on the all-time best-seller list. There will also be a group of highly readable short stories, including John E. Kelly's smashing Old West railroading yarn, "Solitude Basin," with "Bull Jim" Marsh, of "Bridger Gorge," showing up again, and "Slicker Than Water," by Mark Lish, a new ZGWM writer. If there's room for it, there'll be a B. M. Bower novelette, too. So long till the next issue!

—THE EDITORS.

12 issues of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE including short stories, features, and magazine abridgments of ZANE GREY NOVELS, all for $3.00!

ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE
Poughkeepsie, New York.

Gentlemen:

Please send me the next 12 issues of ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE. I enclose $3.00. Foreign (no Canada), $4.00.

Name_____

Address_____

City_____ Zone_____ State_____

Subscriptions received by April 20 start with the June issue; those received after April 20 start with the July issue.

QUIET KILLER

I DON'T KNOW straight up about sheep myself, but Old Red has spent many a long year herding the woolly critters around. I guess there isn't very much Old Red don't know about sheep, and all the troubles a herder had in the early days. He tells me that although the coyotes were the worst of the sheep killers because of their great numbers and their deep cunning, bobcats and cougars also got away with plenty of mutton. A cougar could often creep up on a flock unnoticed by the dogs and would seldom stir up the sheep. The flock would just mill around stupidly while the cat quietly committed murder in its midst. Sometimes he would hang around a flock for days, making off with a hundred-pound wether every night. According to Red, one of these big cats would carry his kill by throwing it over his shoulder, packing it that way for miles to bring it to his young in the lair. To get one of these dangerous killers it was generally necessary either to poison it or to trail it to its den.

NICK FIRFIRES

OUTLAW BRONC Painted by Leonard H. Reedy